

this
mortal
coil

cynthia asquith

THIS MORTAL COIL

By CYNTHIA ASQUITH

The nine stories—two of them novelettes—which comprise this collection represent the entire output of Cynthia Asquith in the genre of the weird and fantastic. Her reputation as a connoisseur of the macabre long ago established by the anthologies she edited, Cynthia Asquith has created a group of old-fashioned spectres and apparitions which will delight the aficionado.

Here are such fine tales as *In a Nutshell*, a striking study of poetic justice; *The Corner Shop*, one of the gentlest of ghost stories, and a fine example to prove that all ghosts are not malefic; *The Follower*, a story of horror no reader will easily forget; and *The Lovely Voice*, a memorable study of crime, seen through the eyes of a child.

Cynthia Asquith's conventional English settings, her simple, direct style, combined with a vivid sense of the dramatic, and a strong story-sense all contribute to the effectiveness of these tales of the supernatural.

This Mortal Coil is the first collection of her stories to be published anywhere.



The jacket is the work of Ronald Clyne.

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E X L I B R I S

EMOLYNE M. MADDOX

This Mortal Coil



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This Mortal Coil

CYNTHIA ASQUITH



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This Mortal Coil

In a Nutshell

YES, she must make a clean break—get right away from all associations. Such a long time now since the—the occurrence, that really one couldn't feel any connection with the woman who had done—the woman to whom that dreadful thing had happened. At least not while awake. And yet, because of this awful dream, that one fragment of time in the far-off past was wrecking her life! . . . Sell the house? Yes, that's what she must do. Start afresh in a completely new environment. . . . For the thousandth time Felicity Creswell told herself these things. A wriggle of doubt disturbed her mind. Suppose it was no use? Flight did not always mean escape. By no means. But, like all "shallow" women—(some of her "friends" were candid)—was she not to a peculiar degree affected by her surroundings? Every time she left home did she not also leave behind all responsibilities, cares and obligations, and in enjoyment of today forget yesterday and ignore tomorrow? Yes, she could shed her "self"—whatever that might

be—as easily as a garment. Indeed, had she only herself to consider, she often thought she would prefer always to live like a bird of—of paradise was it?—no, passage. What suited her was gracefully to perch in someone else's house, preen her feathers and then quickly spread her wings and flit away to delight some other equally dazzled hostess. Leading this kind of life, she would wake each morning to that delightful sense of lightness and freedom, her sole preoccupation how most pleasantly to pass the day. Plenty of fresh people to meet, too. Making first impressions was what she most enjoyed. Yes, she liked her "friendships" to be new just as she liked her clothes to be new. Luggage, too. She was always buying new luggage. So light and clean the day you choose it; but so heavy directly you used it, and so soon soiled and out of shape. Acquaintances seemed to stand use no better than suit-cases. As for permanent neighbours, they tended to become scarcely more stimulating or less critical than relatives. Yes, she was sure what would suit her best would be to be without any settled home. (Why did so many women—wives of soldiers, sailors and other nomads—bemoan their lack of what they called "roots"? Who wanted roots? Most unattractive things. Plenty of flowers to pick and drop the instant their morning freshness faded was what she liked.) However, because of the one break in the wall of her self-absorption, a bird-of-passage existence was not practicable. Thank Heaven, darling Roy showed no inclination to marry; so of course there must be a permanent home for him to come back to between all his triumphs on cricket-fields and mountains. How happy they had always been together! "More like sister and brother than mother and son." (That was what

people said, she was sure. Absurd, wasn't it?) Even now there were still lovely times when he would make her quite forget her trouble. For she would not admit she was "haunted." No, never in the daytime, except when she was too tired from the horror of one night to recover before the next. Sometimes, she would deliberately shun sleep—postpone it by cup after cup of strong black coffee. But how without sleep could one, as she put it, "keep up"? If things went on like this she would begin to "look her age," and of all the clichés that cluttered up her mind, this was the most distressing. Oh! it was too cruel—this awful recurring dream! Always inexorably the same: over and over again exhuming a memory buried deep, deep below the level of her conscious mind; night after night hauling her back twenty-four years; compelling her to re-live one tiny fragment of time, to re-enact one action. No, no! not an action—an *accident*! Not only did the dream leave her exhausted, cold and trembling, but not until long after she awoke could she shake off the anguish of remorse left behind by her sleeping self. So soon as she was quite recovered from the influence of the dream she would repudiate any responsibility, admit no complicity with that long, long ago self. But each time now it seemed to take her longer to "come to" and dismiss the aftermath of horror and sense of guilt. Why, yesterday it had been several hours before she was able to re-envelop herself in the present. Yes, more and more the dream invaded her real life. Like a cold, encroaching sea eating into a pleasant coast, the nights were gaining on the days.

She had never told anyone what it was she dreamt. How could she? But Roy knew she had bad nights and that shortage

of sleep played havoc with her nerves. For some time now she had hinted at the beneficiality of "A complete change," and tonight, as they sipped their after-dinner coffee on the terrace, she decided to tell him her resolve.

It was a tranced summer night. Not a leaf stirred. The trees stood like white sentinels in the moonlight; the gently presiding house, the long sweep of the lawn and the three loops of the river looked as though they had been dipped in quicksilver. The unearthly light silvered Felicity's golden hair and shed a strangeness on her son's startlingly good looks. Though she expected regret, the dismay on his over-mobile young face startled her. Imploringly he urged her to let rather than sell. Was she sure it was more than an impulse she might regret?

"I *must* burn my boats," she said glibly. Determined to cut herself off, she was grateful to her memory for so appropriate a cliché.

"But I thought you felt about this place as I do, Mother," he pleaded. "Don't you love it? Father did, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," she answered, the lovely ripple of her mouth straightening into a hard line.

"Surely you'll hate leaving it and all its associations?"

She gave her "sad-but-brave-little-woman" smile—flew it like a banner. Of course it would be an awful pang, but, as her doctor insisted, what could she do?

Gloomily Roy agreed that health was all important. Obviously his mothers "mind" (to confer on it a courtesy title) was made up. That was always final. For all her air of gentle irresolution, whenever it was a question of getting her own

way, she was enviably firm. Though fully aware of her limitations, Roy had never outgrown his childhood's love for an indulgent and entrancingly pretty mother. With an active original mind of his own, he did not miss the mental stimulus she could not provide. Indeed, he rather liked her extreme naïveté and thought her artless clichés rather touching. (The one thing he *had* found hard to forgive was her choice of his Christian name.)—Latterly he had been greatly worried by the incongruous distress in his mother's beautiful blue eyes. What could prey on a mind so untroubled by thought, imagination or diffidence? How about a little tentative probing?

"Sleeping badly, Mother?"

"Yes."

"Is it that you can't get off or can't stay put?" he asked, between two puffs at his pipe.

"It's that I can't keep awake!"

The quick, unguarded reply startled him.

"Can't keep awake? Why ever should you want to?"

"I have such an awful dream—dreams, I mean."

Her voice quivered and the knuckles of her clasped hands showed white.

"Poor Mother. How horrid! I wonder what makes you dream. Doctor any idea?"

"No, Roy."

"Dreams can be the devil," he said sympathetically. Rising to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder, he declaimed:

"Oh! God! I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a King of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams!"

"Do *you* have bad dreams, Roy?"

"No, thank you, Mother," he said, sinking back into his chair. "Why?"

"Oh! I only wondered," she fluttered, "you spoke so forcibly. What was that you said about preferring to live in a nutshell?"

Smiling, Roy re-quoted Hamlet.

"How funnily put!" she said. "Did you make it up?"

No great reader herself (a fact often thankfully stated), Felicity imputed remarkable versatility to a son addicted to quoting.

"No, Mother," laughed Roy. "I did not 'make it up.' I was forestalled."

"I think I shall call my new house The Nutshell," mused his mother. "It sounds so cozy, so—so self-contained."

Her words seemed to clinch the matter.

So they really were to leave this beloved place—to him the core of the world. What an agonising thought! With a lump in his throat, he turned to the moonlit house as if to ask its help, but in the cold, esstranging light it looked utterly aloof. His eyelids pricked.

Early next morning Felicity set off in the sleek new white car, the lady's maid beside the new chauffeur, and her new white luggage piled jauntily at the back. The house-hunting was most enjoyable. Such fun inspecting other women's bedrooms and plenty of strangers to make first impressions on! At the end of six weeks' hunt, the chauffeur and the maid, both of whom had by this time had ample time to recover from their first impressions, were dismissed with a month's notice; for this was in the days, vaguely described as "more spacious," when it was

the employers, not the employees, who did the picking and choosing.

If Roy had been surprised by his mother's decision to leave her old home, he was dumbfounded by her choice of a new one. She who so well appreciated—for not even the select band of her detractors could say she lacked taste—the dignified perfection of her Georgian house to settle in a horrible fake advertised as a "Tudor gem" (Bijou Residence)—poky and odiously "quaint"—with every detestable feature he had so often heard her deride in the homes of other women. Dark newly-wain-scoted rooms, discoloured glass in sham mullioned windows, undulating floors and ceilings so low that he would never be able to stand upright. As for the slippery curly staircase with its ludicrous dangling plush rope to help you up and down, it was almost a booby-trap. Why, thought Roy, as with rising claustrophobia he inspected his future home, what the atmosphere of the whole place suggested was "Ye Olde Tea-Shoppe" run by "decayed gentlewomen" in hand-woven linen. How on earth, after all the light and spaciousness of the perfectly proportioned rooms of her old home, would his mother ever adjust herself to anything so dark and cramped? Moreover, in such a setting, would not her own exquisite Sheraton furniture look hopelessly out of place? Alas! Yes, she *was* busily engaged in picking up precisely such bargains as he detested most—cumbrously carved Jacobean "pieces," refectory tables, spinning wheels, oak chests, frowsty four-poster beds. Would she think it necessary to complete the picture by studding the walls with brass warming-pans? What he could not be expected to

realize was that her one obsessing purpose was to have everything as unlike what she was accustomed to as possible. Disguise was what she sought—by obliterating every material reminder of her past life to conceal herself from herself. The more incongruous her surroundings, the less to link her with that remote repudiated self thrust back upon her by a dream. If one was unable to control one's "subconscious" (wasn't that what they called it?) at least let there be nothing extraneous to drive it back to the past.

Before Felicity had settled into her new home, Roy had left for Switzerland. In an enjoyable "whirl" his mother attended sales, harried upholsterers, ransacked shops, and engaged a new staff, for naturally so resolute a turning over a new page involved dismissal of all old servants.

About six weeks after she established herself, Roy, who meanwhile had won the skiing championship and climbed four mountains in record time, rejoined his mother. The bad news he brought had already put quite a new expression into his eyes, but its telling could very well wait. He would not spoil his homecoming. *Home?* Alas! But if he detested The Nutshell (for so she really had christened her odious "Bijou Residence") he was delighted with the change in his mother. Never had he seen her so gay and carefree. Remarkably young for her age she always looked. (Whether this was to her credit or the reverse was subject to dispute. "It's her Spirit," enthused the bewitched, "Such resilience!" "Insensibility," snapped disparagers.) Yes, the trick had worked; the new house had the effect of a fancy dress. She had thoroughly enjoyed enslaving new servants and captivating new neighbours, and in her new

context felt so delightfully, rejuvenatingly "free"—quite what she called, "taken out of herself." Yes, here life was like a nice newly-sponged slate, and so far nothing had occurred to hinder her from living for each day as it came. Not once since she settled into The Nutshell had she had that awful, anguishing dream, and, cosily ensconced in the immediate present, her undivining mind feared no relapse.

While she showed him over The Nutshell, Roy (very far from feeling a "king of infinite space") tried to repress his irritation each time he skidded on an over-polished floor or bumped his head against an artificially worm-eaten beam.

After dinner they sat over the wholly unnecessary wood fire, and by the peach-shaded lamplight the delicate triangle of her rather blank face looked so lovely, so untouched by time that he began to feel almost reconciled to the pseudo "Tudor Gem."

"You *are* in good face, Mother!" he exclaimed. "Sleeping well? You certainly look as if you got plenty of beauty sleep."

"Lovely!" she cooed. "I haven't had one bad night since I snuggled into my dear little Nutshell. Oh! I am so happy in it!"

"That's splendid," said Roy, burrowing into his tobacco pouch. Finding it empty, he went upstairs. Of course, he spurned the support of the plush rope and on the way down, his foot slipped on the third step and he tobogganed all the rest of the flight. He apologized for a profane outburst.

"Hurt, Darling?" fluttered his mother, always ready to run to kiss the place and make it well.

"No, thanks," he said, rubbing his elbows as he picked himself up, "but I must say the descent of the Matterhorn is child's play compared to the descent of your 'quaint' staircase."

His mother chattered on about her contentment in her Nutshell. "So easy to run. So cozy. Such a convenient train-service. Such pleasant neighbours. Such a complete change!"

"Yes it is indeed a 'change,' " he said, ruefully.

"Are you sure you didn't hurt yourself, Roy?" she asked anxiously, her forehead suddenly puckered. In spite of the tan wind and sun had left on his face, it struck her that he looked tired and strained. Quiet too, wasn't he? Surely unusually silent? Far less of what she called his "naughty teasing"—a sort of tender banter that made her feel like a cosseted cat well supplied with cream. Without realizing where the change lay, she missed from his face its usual look of eager expectancy. Suddenly too, for the first time she noticed—and as she did so her face hardened—a likeness to his father.

"No damage," he assured her.

Should he tell her now? No, why disturb that chirruping contentment? Bad news could wait. Though perhaps, after all she would not consider it such very bad news? "No danger," they said. Not with proper care. (But, my God, *what* care!) No doubt she would be glad to have him more at home. Blessed (he had never found it a curse) with a 'competence' and a great deal more, he had drifted into becoming, so to speak, a professional amateur cricketer and this game and mountaineering took him away the greater part of the year. "Brain and brawn" was one of his mother's favourite clichés, and she often preened herself on so doubly-dowered a son. He hoped she would be glad to have him concentrate on his writing? For that was what he must do. Make of writing a career instead of a hobby. But would he ever be able to settle down in this

odious little Nutshell? In the old house, which he still loved so dearly, with the silver snake of the river and the trees climbed in boyhood to look at, and life-long friends within easy reach, the restricted future might have been possible to face. But cooped up here! Just live from day to day and slowly try to readjust himself. Besides, so far he had had only one doctor's opinion. Who knows? Meanwhile, what a relief to find his mother so well. He had really been seriously alarmed about her.

At eleven she went up to bed. Dutifully picking up his cue, he indulged her with a little banter over this eleventh hour snatch at beauty-sleep. At the top of the stairs she turned to kiss her hand and started a smile that never got finished. As he looked up, that new likeness to his father struck her again and her mouth became a hard slit.

With his chin cupped in his hands Roy sat over the whispering fire until only one log glowed. At last, with a heavy sigh, he heaved his magnificent body out of the deep armchair and kicked the last embers until they crumbled into grey ashes. Then with a shrug availing himself of the plush rope, gingerly, laboriously he climbed the stairs pausing half way up to rest. A grin twisted his face. Absurd irony that the word 'climb' should have come into his mind! As he reached the top—the *top!* (why not call it the *summit?*) and bumped his head on a beam, a sudden vision of the stainless snows to which (so they said) he must never climb again, brought such a pang of longing that he heard himself groan. Hating his consciously cozy pampering bedroom and its stuffy four-poster, he yearned for the lonely heights, the thin silver air and the bareness of a

climber's pitchpine hut. Step by step he reclimbed that last thrilling peak and then one by one all the peaks he had not had time to climb towered up before his eyes. Shimmering, beckoning, unattainable, they filled him with unbearable longing. In an agony of frustration he thumped and bit his frilled pillow, tossed and turned on his over-soft bed. At last, deliberately wrenching his thoughts from this torment of tantalisation, he tried to concentrate on his relief at finding his mother so well, and at last sleep came.

But, alas! the depressingly damp and muggy morning took even his one satisfaction away. Something had swept the look of well-being from his mother's for once recklessly made-up face. Last night almost childishly care-free; this morning harassed and worn. Yes, the tense, scared, distressed expression had returned to her eyes. Her voice too—fretted, nervy. What had happened?

"Bad night, Mother?"

"Ghastly!" she snapped and broke into evasive inconsequent prattle.

Really this disappointment was more than she could bear! Her dear, trusted little Nutshell had failed her! She had gone to bed, confidently looking forward to hours of untroubled, beautifying sleep. And then the dream had come and left her stripped of self-deception, trembling, cold, sick with remorse and hopeless longing to undo the past. What had brought it back? her half-regained consciousness asked.

A livid white light swept the dim recesses of her vague mind. Of course, Roy's return! And the shock of that wretched resemblance! How could she have been so simple as to suppose

that mere bricks and mortar, any one building more than another, could keep out the past? Of course what gave continuity to her disintegrated identity was the one human being she loved. Yes, Roy it was who strung her present and her future to her past, and by stirring her emotions, re-linked her with whatever intensity of feeling she had ever experienced, and in so doing roused her subconscious to overthrow the censorship of her conscious mind. So long as she loved Roy, she would never be able to sever herself from that other woman who had gone by her name all those years ago. But for him, how easy to disown that poor wraith! Cruel irony that one so untenacious of the past, so ready to begin anew, should be maddened by a mere memory! Why should she who, as she so often stated, would not "hurt a fly" (and indeed her disposition was most amiable) be exposed to such senseless suffering? And by her own son!

Directly after breakfast she motored up to London for the day. Considerably soothed by a "facial" and a visit to her pet palmist, she returned far less uncharacteristically uncommunicative. In high plaintive tones she poured out her grievance.

"Really, it's too bad! Here I have put myself to the trouble of up-rootal. *Everything* new! Surroundings, servants, friends. And now I'm let down. Last night was as bad as ever. That awful dream!"

"What *is* your dream, Mother?" asked Roy gravely.

"Never mind *what* I dream. That's neither here nor there. And I never said it was the same dream, did I?"

She spoke vehemently, even angrily, and then after a pause, continued disingenuously.

"But, what, I ask you, can have started me dreaming again? I've broken with all old associations."

"Not quite, Mother, have you?" said Roy with a smile, "What about me? You haven't got rid of me yet, have you?"

"You?"

"Yes. I don't see how you can expect your own son not to be—er—evocative. As far as I'm concerned none of this elaborate escapism can help you. Yes, I'm afraid it's my return that has cracked your Nutshell. Sorry, Mother."

Silently, unconvincingly, she shook her head.

"I suppose you couldn't try to tell me about your nightmares? I've studied psychology quite a bit, you know."

"No, no!"

"Dreams can be important psychologically, but bad dreams *are* quite often due to digestive trouble," suggested Roy.

"I have an excellent digestion," she lamented, "I can digest anything. Anything!"

"On the other hand," continued Roy, "some authority I was reading only yesterday maintains that dreams are never due merely to the dreamer's own fancy but are always caused by some exterior agency."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, that they are always the result of someone else thinking very intently about the dreamer—in the writer's opinion very often someone dead."

"What?" shrilled Felicity, her curiously pale blue eyes widening.

"But I'm sure there's nothing in that theory," Roy added quickly. "Then Cowper, the poet," he went on, "refused to

believe his awful dreams could be due to anything so inadequate as his own human reason. He was sure that God spoke to him through dreams; sometimes to instruct, more often to admonish. But of course the poor fellow had acute religious mania," hastily added Roy, alarmed by the expression in his mother's eyes. (What a blundering fool he'd been!) "Please don't think I'm suggesting you are to blame for your dreams, Mother," he said, trying to laugh it off.

No response.

He did not know how to deal with this muteness.

"Well, if you won't let me help you, perhaps I'd better take myself off and give your—er—'non-attachment' cure a proper chance? . . . So sorry to be such a nut-cracker."

Visibly she pulled herself together.

"No, darling, *please* don't leave me. You aren't going off to climb again this year, are you?" (Was it hope or fear that edged her voice?)

"This year? . . . Next year? . . . Some time? . . . queried Roy with a vigorous shake of his head after each query. Then, with an exaggerated, twisted grin, he loudly brought out the word—"Never!"

Now was the time to tell her what must be told.

"As a matter of fact, Mother, I over-did things too soon after that blasted rheumatic fever. Rowing—jumping—climbing—and what not. I've conked up my heart. The doctor says I've got to go slow—damned slow, I'm afraid. In fact, Mother, you've got a crock on your hands."

Aghast, she broke into mere fragments of speech interlarded with endearments. Indeed, for a few minutes she almost

forgot herself. In spite of his off-hand manner the hurt in his young eyes wrung her heart. Oh! the pity of it! That glorious youthful strength—the joy of her eyes—could it really be impaired? . . . Then, as through a blur of tears she looked at Roy, in her mind's eye there rose up new and sweetly touching pictures of herself. Forever fluttering in attendance, she saw herself reconciling a son now utterly dependent on her to his maimed life. Yes, she would be his unfailing support, inspiration and delight. "Make up for everything." That is what she would do. She must learn to type. Shorthand, too. And all the wonderful books he would now have time to write would be dictated to her—"Yes, my mother is my amanuensis.") Volume after volume running into ten editions and each, though of course with variations, bearing much the same dedication: "To my mother, but for whom this book could not have been written."

Poetry, too, yes, he must write poetry. ("A sonnet sequence to my mother.") No doubt he would be the youngest Poet Laureate ever elected (was it elected they were, or created?) A butt of Malmsey Wine, wasn't that what they got given? (A butt would look very well in the Tudor dining-parlour.) And of course she would not be selfish. Any college-friends of his would always be welcome. Relays of girls, too, she would invite, but, ever vigilant, she would always be on the spot to nip in the bud anything between him and any aspirant not quite good enough—and who could be quite good enough for him? He would tell her how he could never help comparing girls with herself, and she would gently chide him.

A whole film of pretty pictures flitted before her tear-filled

eyes (she was one of the few women who could weep without disfigurement) while all the while tender words of commiseration flowed.

But she must be practical, too, and prompt. Not one blade of grass should grow under her feet. Telephoning to her own doctor for the name of the leading heart-specialist, she managed, through a cancellation, to secure an appointment for that afternoon and swept Roy up to London. The sombre waiting-room with its gold-framed Royal Academy reproductions and back numbers of *Punch* reminded her of the little boy in a sailor-suit whom she used to take to the dentist. In those days she had always accompanied him into the torture-chamber; now, in deference to his being technically grown-up, she waited while he went into the consulting room. The great man had been asked to have a few words with her after the consultation. When twenty minutes later Roy came back, his face was painstakingly unexpressive. Snatching up an armful of *Punches*, he plunged into a chair. Requested to "step this way," Felicity was ushered into the frock-coated, silver-haired presence of the famous physician. Rather ponderously distinguished-looking, but kindly-eyed, he motioned her to a chair. At once she became aware of that queer sensation so often felt in consulting-rooms. The interval between now and the last time, when in just such another room she awaited the diagnosis, telescoped. The whole of existence seemed made up of this particular experience; consulting-rooms the only real things in life—everything else dim memories of something read or dreamt. It seemed only a moment ago that this man's predecessor had motioned her to a chair.

Sir Graham glanced up at her with shrewd, considerate eyes.

"Is my son's heart badly strained?" she heard her unsteady voice ask.

"More than that, I regret to say," he answered gravely. As he spoke his eyes watched her face intently and he slowly clasped and unclasped his well-kept hands above his crossed knees. "I am grieved to tell you he is suffering from a condition that is extremely rare before middle life—very rare indeed. In fact quite exceptional."

Through a humming in her ears, the diagnosis came to her in half comprehended snatches. "Unfortunately . . . over-exerted too soon . . . rheumatic fever . . . damage to coronary arteries . . . consequent degeneration of the heart muscle . . . very serious cardiac dilation . . . resultant defective blood supply has I deeply regret to say resulted in the . . . er . . . disaffection of the heart—(he tells me he has already had two paroxysms)—known as angina pectoris."

"Angina?" she cried. "But that was what my husband died of!"

The doctor's bushy eyebrows rose and his hand intercepted a little deprecating cough.

"With proper care your son should survive you."

His voice was proving. Then another flow of professional words came to her in snatches. "Of course, the most scrupulous attention to general health—avoidance of all exertion or agitation. Fortunately we have the most invaluable remedy . . . amyl nitrate. . . . This must always be at hand. . . . If all these precautions are taken I—er—I do not think we need apprehend any—er—tragedy."

"Thank you," she heard herself murmur.

On flowed his voice expatiating on the virtues of amyl nitrate. Then minute instructions as to its use. It was made up in little tubes, each containing the necessary drops, and at onset of paroxysm the sufferer must break one into a handkerchief and hold it to mouth and nose.

"Yes, I know those little tubes," she said dully.

Further injunctions. Of course the patient must never be out of reach of help at night; there must always be someone at the other end of a bell.

Before long, with kindly hand-patting and reiterated sympathy and reassurance, he was piloting her towards the door. Almost the last thing she heard him say as he bowed her out was, "I am sure you will not let him slip through your fingers." The very same words!

Two minutes later she and Roy, their hands tightly clasped, were on their way back to the Nutshell. That evening, over the fire they, as she put it, "faced the future together." Roy put up a gallant bluff and, contriving to "keep bright," she devised every kind of contrivance for invalid comfort and entertainment. So long as she was with him, the preoccupations of her new rôle kept in abeyance a crouching terror. But alone in her bedroom she was instantly overcome by the certainty that she was to dream. In the hope of lulling whatever part of her nervous system betrayed her, she took a strong sleeping-draught. Meanwhile—hideous turn of the screw!—even awake she found herself back in the past; utterly unable to get out of its grip. The emotions of the day, that consulting-room, the way the doctor had spoken; the familiar name "amyl-nitrate," all so fatally re-invocative, had carried her right back. Twenty-five intervening years had shrivelled.

The chauffeur had rigged up the electric bell so as to ring by her bedside, just as it used to do all those years ago. Now it connected her with Roy, but tonight again and again she caught herself thinking it was not her son but her husband who lay in the adjoining room. In spite of the sedative she could not get to sleep. Between one and two, impelled by the queer feeling now amounting to hallucination, that she was back in the past with her husband next door, she tiptoed into the next room to reassure herself with the sight of Roy. There he lay, fast asleep with his head on his arm, as she had so often seen him in childhood, and looking several years younger even than when awake. Remarkably well, too. Could there really be much wrong? . . . "I am grieved to tell you that your son . . . angina pectoris. . . ." But suppose the bell rang *now*? As it used to ring occasionally all those years ago when night after night she had always been ready to spring out of bed and rush into the next room . . . "Are you a light sleeper?" How well she remembered the doctor asking her that question. But that had been the other doctor—not Roy's but her husband's doctor. She could still see his rugged, benevolent face, hear the would-be reassuring tones of his inflected voice. And he had used almost exactly the same words as the doctor today. "I am sure you won't let him slip through your fingers. No, dear lady, with proper care he should live for many, many years." And it was while he spoke that that curious split feeling had come over her, as if she were watching someone else who, though another person, was yet also herself. And she had become acutely conscious of the expression on her own face. (It was as though an expression were something separate that, like a fan, you

held up to your face.) Relief, sweetness, unflinching devotion to duty was what her smile expressed. What she felt, too. But how about those strong cross-currents of which simultaneously her mind was aware? Had one so screwed oneself up for "the worst" that anything less than the worst "let one down"? A crisis braced. Relief relaxed—left one a prey to panicking self-distrust. Was she equal to the demands of so exacting a future? And for her husband himself? Would not swift "release" have been the kinder sentence? Cut off from every activity that he loved, was indefinite prolongation of life merciful? Ceaseless monotony punctuated only by paroxysms of pain! The thought of such suffering made the doctor's kindly face go all wavy through a blur of tears, but not for one second did she lose her awareness of her own smile still tightly held to her face. And meanwhile before her mind's eye, endlessly, the future unfurled itself. For years and years—possibly far on into middle-age she saw herself "tied." No respite, no "life of her own." From now on able to see her lover only in brief, broken snatches. Would he have patience? Scarcely a hope! Leave her husband? Be condemned for callousness? She, who had to be well thought of. Impossible! She would never have the heart. How could you hurt someone ill, helpless, utterly dependent on you? She could hear what people would say! But her lover? So "difficult" he was—so tempestuous—and however, with nerves strained by nursing, would she be able to stand perpetual scenes? No, she would never be able to "hold" him. The icy thought of losing him made her heart turn over. Drained of all colour, all warmth, life stretched ahead, a treadmill of dreary duty. . . . Wasn't it astonishing how much could flash through your mind in only

a few moments before you had even had time to finish your smile or the doctor had done patting you on the shoulder and calling you a "brave little woman"?

And then she had gone home to face her new life. She kept wonderfully "bright" (everyone said so) and the doctors praised her devoted care of her husband. Though the most rigid routine was never infringed, every now and then in spite of all precautions, the invalid had a seizure. By day he never failed to carry a supply of amyl nitrate on him and a bottle always stood on the table by his bed close to the electric bell push. The bell rang in his wife's room.

One evening at bed-time, about eighteen months after her husband's heart disease had been diagnosed, Felicity remembered she had forgotten to order a fresh supply of amyl nitrate and only one tube was left. To remind herself to ring up the chemist first thing in the morning, she propped the bottle (she could never remember whether it was called amyl nitrate or nitrate amyl) up against the telephone by her bed. The very same night, owing to a defective electric fuse, fire broke out in Roy's nursery. The butler put it out almost at once, but not before the screams of the hysterical nurse had roused the house. Thinking him agitated by the commotion, Felicity made her husband some Ovaltine and sat with him for some time.

Before long, she went back to bed and soon fell asleep but in the small hours of the morning the electric bell ripped her out of a dream of her lover and brought her to her feet and into her husband's room. Unable to speak, agonised, white as his pillow, his contorted hand pointed to the place where the amyl nitrate should be. "One second," she cried and rushed to

fetch it. While she darted from one room to the other, snatched up the bottle and a handkerchief and was back again, thoughts flashed through her mind with lightning speed. She foresaw this crisis of pain and terror recurring again and again and again (how ghastly, how terrifying he looked!), pictured herself worn out by strain, aging before her time, her face drawn, her vivacity quenched. Simultaneously an alternative vista presented itself. No more pain, no more fear even of pain. Instead, the poor sufferer allowed to "depart," to slip away. She could picture the lovely calm on his face after he had got his "release." . . . The quiet, dignified funeral. ("Everything so beautifully done!") The gleam of golden hair through a thick veil (she disapproved of "modern" women who did not wear weeds)—a pious, recuperative year of gentle mourning . . . and then—Italy and the beloved! Alone together! The Venetian night sky, the black gondola gently dipping and rising on shadowy waters across which floated the gay twang of guitars and the voices of singers with the southern sun in their throats. "Santa Lucia! Santa Lucia!" . . . But even if admittedly such imaginings did flit through her mind, she was never conscious of any process of thought. Certainly of no decision. No order was transmitted by brain to hand. No, *no!* She didn't *do* it! It *happened*. . . . Somehow as she advanced towards the bed, the one remaining tube got tipped out into the hand in which she held a handkerchief and when she was less than half way across the room some unaccountable spasm made her close her hand too soon; close it so tight that the tube was crushed and its precious fumes evaporated before she reached the bedside. Desperately he grasped the handkerchief. Too late. Nothing was left to inhale.

That dreadful drowning look in his eyes! In a few seconds it was all over. With the useless handkerchief in his last convulsive grasp, he lay quite still. In a quarter of an hour the doctor was there. Crushed in the dead man's hand the handkerchief told its own story. Another seizure and this time the amyl nitrate had failed. Marvelously effective stuff, but of course not "infallible." Nothing was. Very, very sad. Such a splendid wife. "Poor dear little woman—so overcome." He had hoped the patient would be spared for a long time, but, of course, what had happened had always been a possibility.

Everyone was so sweet to the "poor little widow" and she was quite sure that it had been "for the best". Mercifully "granted his release", "promoted", "passed on" before protracted illness had had time to sour him, her husband left such a beautifully unimpaired memory. This was a very soothing thought. Then unfortunately she had found his letter written in case of death, and dated only a fortnight ago. He wanted her to know that, odd though it may seem, the last year had been the happiest of his married life. A "queer, contemplative sort of chap," he supposed he must be, but there it was; all he seemed to need was herself to look at, books, food, the view from his window and the joy of their little son. A convincing letter, a letter she grew bitterly to resent, for now she could no longer hoodwink herself into the belief that her husband had been holding out both hands to death. Without its testimony the theory that for him everything had been *for the best* would have lulled any qualms she might have felt. (Once to her surprise the comfortable coinage "Mercy murder" had strayed into her mind. How absurd! *Murder*? But she hadn't done anything—nothing deliberate. A

reflex action it had been, if any action at all—which of course it wasn't.)

And then the day after this disquieting letter had turned up there came a shattering blow. After all the "accident" could not produce the golden future envisaged. Posted from abroad, a letter from her lover, written before he heard the news told her that, as she could not be wholly his, he must very reluctantly give her up. In short he was engaged to be married . . . So that was all over.

Her emptied life (recent widowhood forbade any distractions she might have sought) now turned unendurably grey and the sense of the utter futility of what she had—of what had happened, mocked and maddened her. Of course it was not remorse she suffered (how could you feel remorse for an accident?) but welling self-pity. However, as time passed and she could again go about, the life-long necessity to please reasserted itself and the unending preoccupation of looking her best agreeably distracted her mind. Gradually the pain of what she called her one *Grande passion* faded, and her love for an exceptionally engaging child added to the resumed diversion of making first impressions, pleasantly crowded her days. With her great gift for self-deception she was now sure she had quite recovered from the shock. Yes, thanks to her famous resilience she had not allowed misfortune to maim her life. As a mother, was not happiness a positive duty? Did not her favourite poem begin: "If I have faltered more or less. . . ."?

And then suddenly years later, one night (*why* on one particular night more than any other?) she had dreamed the

dream, since when her life fell into two parts—before and after this terrible visitation began . . . What were the preliminary stages—the strangely confused opening of her dream? She, herself and yet not herself, (or why the self-reproach?) lay in an agony of remorse for her husband's death which, so it seemed, had only just occurred. Then suddenly, flooding her being with relief, came the blessed realisation that after all he was not dead. No, it had been only a dream—a hideous dream. He was alive, safe next door, and she was innocent. Now she could atone for what she had done. Done? But, thank God! she *hadn't* done it! At that moment in her dream the bell rang. So the call had come! Now, at once, he needed her and thank God she was there ready to save him. In a second she was in the next room. Yes, an agonising attack of angina. Convulsed, he couldn't speak; his agonised eyes tried to tell her something and his contorted fingers held up a handkerchief. The amyl nitrate? Not in its proper place! Where? She remembered noticing it on her own table. Why was it there? How careless! But, thank God, she would be in time! Quicker than thought she rushed for the bottle . . . Then as she reapproached his bedside, the nightmare part of the dream began. About to press the handkerchief to his face (she had already broken the little tube) suddenly her limbs refused to obey her brain. It was as though some inexplicable, alien control took command. Anguished, she found herself unable to move hand or foot; paralysed, helpless, she held before his eyes but just out of his reach, the vital handkerchief, and while desperately, he struggled to clutch it, wasting themselves in the air, the precious fumes evaporated and soon, for want of what her hand withheld, she saw him die. Then at the sound of her own cry, she

awoke to find herself in bed, sweating, cold and trembling.

Ever since that night, at irregular intervals she had dreamt the same dream. It always started with the agony of remorse followed by the rapture of relief. Then, at his bedside came the ghastly moment of realising what was to happen, for at this point in her dream she would always remember what must follow. The hideous horror of knowing the infinite atrociousness of what is about to be done and yet to be utterly helpless to avert it! Each time that appalling paralysis. Unable to budge . . . Then the re-awakening to a hell of remorse, and the torture of the certainty that before long she would again dream the same dream. Yes, because of what had once been, she was condemned over and over again *to watch him die in agony.*

Awaking after the climax to her half-regained consciousness, there would then appear no partition between past and present and the days would seem no more than brief respites between the nights; but as, regaining control, her conscious mind resumed its remarkably efficient censorship, deriding her own sufferings, she would bluff herself back into the belief that she felt no guilt. Then, rushing after any distraction, she would fill her waking hours to brimming so that they, not the nights, might seem the reality. All day long she busily reburied what the night had unburied. And always after a respite of two or three dreamless nights, she would begin to think the curse had lifted.

Tonight (twenty-four years after her first nightmare) exhausted by the shock of the bad news about Roy and all the long strain of the day, she felt a renewal of the dream would

be more than she could endure. That dreadful thing Roy had said kept coming into her mind: "Dreams are often the result of someone else thinking very intently about you—very often someone dead." Someone *dead* thinking about her? Panicking, she deplored the sleeping-draught and clung on to consciousness as though to the edge of a cliff above abysms of horror, but when at last exhausted she succumbed, it was to a blessedly dreamless sleep. Had the urgency of the present weakened the hold of the past? Might she find salvation in devoting her life to Roy?

Hopefully she threw herself into making his invalid existence as easy, as luxurious as possible and, panting to show her aching love, perpetually hovered round him; and indeed through this unremitting solicitude she did approach nearer to the happiness of self-forgetfulness than ever before. For some time, the demands of each day safely anchored her to the present. Something else filled her with hope. Her palmist, in whom she placed immense confidence, was most reassuring. For many years now she had regularly consulted Madam Isis. (How could money be more pleasantly spent than by paying someone else to talk about you?) "You are far too sensitive. You let other people, incapable of appreciating you properly, take advantage of your good nature. As for your remarkable gifts—what a pity over-diffidence and perhaps just a little indolence prevent their full development." Felicity never tired of hearing that kind of "home-truth," from someone so understanding and sympathetic as this twentieth-century witch. Long ago skilfully tentative pronouncements (Madam Isis was an adept at making an interrogation appear a statement) and

the client's hair-trigger responsiveness to prompting (she rose like a fish at a skilfully thrown fly) had established the understanding that one "great" though undefined "shadow" darkened what would otherwise have been so bright an existence. "I see one great joy and one great trouble in your hand?"

Glibly, Felicity had supplied the fact that her son was the "great joy." Tacitly, it was agreed between client and witch that for some reason (probably loyalty to others) the "trouble" must remain unspecified. "My great trouble"—that was how it was always reverently referred to. Hints were dropped that it was probably due more to the client's nature ("that *exquisite* sensitiveness") than to objective circumstances. She had allowed it to become an "obsession."

Felicity's first visit after the "dedication" of her life to Roy's invalidism was most rewarding. The moment that, eagerly peeling off her gloves, she passed through the bead curtains into Madam Isis's vaguely Egyptian parlour, she knew she was to find comfort. With grateful confidence she laid her exquisitely manicured hands on the black velvet cushion. Devoutly Madam Isis scrutinised the soft upturned palms through a magnifying glass, gazed into a crystal and, closing her eyes, became impressively oracular. She saw "a change"—felt a wonderful sense of a "new purpose", something that inspired self-abnegation. Inadvertently but fluently, the client filled in the actual particulars.

Madam Isis gave an ecstatic wriggle.

"Yes, I see something *very* beautiful. The joy of your life—your son—is destined to deliver you from your" (a genuflection in her voice) "great trouble. Yes" (rhapsodically) "love

will find out the way. In the service of love you will find deliverance. Your son is destined to be the agent of your cure."

Much buoyed up by this prediction, touched and uplifted by the sense of her own selflessness, Felicity cheerfully went back to her "life of devotion," fully assured that before long she would at last be freed from her "great trouble."

But this blessed interlude was to be brief. After about a fortnight the dream returned. And now it came nearly every night. Heavy handicap for a ministering angel! Difficult to be a perpetual fountain of cheerfulness when you were so shattered by the torture of one night, so terrified of the next. But the way she "kept up" as she put it, was the most creditable thing in all her life. Gallantly though he struggled, inevitably poor Roy had fits of unconcealable depression. Not yet adjusted to the role of a crock, he felt no wish to see friends, so scarcely any were admitted into the Nutshell. Occasionally, Felicity went to bridge parties, and once a week she darted up to London for shopping and personal beautification. Otherwise she was perpetually with her son. "Remember I am always at your beck and call. But I won't ever disturb you. Your writing hours shall be sacred." Her habit of dropping her voice to a whisper and with raised forefinger tip-toeing from the room whenever he picked up his pen drove Roy nearly frantic; and now that for the first time in all his life, there was infinite leisure to write in, there seemed nothing he wanted to write. The urge was gone, his mind listless. Would he ever get out of these awful doldrums? If not, how was he to endure a life composed of breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner and tiny doses of exercise? Even reading began to fail him. Books lost their savour. With ad-

mirable self-control, he never voiced his mounting misery, but one sunny morning after heavy snow, the shimmer of the shrouded hills filled him with uncontrollable restlessness and, in sudden defiance, he declared he would take his toboggan out.

Aghast, his mother pleaded that one imprudence might undo all her care.

"But, what," he burst out, "what *is* the use of all this smothering care merely to keep a wretched piece of crockery on the shelf? Sorry, Mother, but are you sure it's worth your while? Isn't there something in the dictum:

" 'Thou shalt not kill, but needs't not strive
Officially to keep alive.'"

What's the matter, Mother?" he asked, for her cheeks that had flamed red; were whitening.

"A twinge of toothache," she answered. "But what horrid words those were, Roy! Did you make them up?"

"No, Mother. I did not 'make them up'," he laughed. "Do they offend your taste?"

"Very cynical. Horribly cynical."

Roy smiled his rueful gay smile. Applied wholly at random, the word "cynical" was his mother's severest condemnation.

He felt better for his outburst and the very next day something wonderful happened. Like a long-coaxed spark bursting into flame, a theme pondered over for weeks suddenly became an over-mastering absorption and with a heavenly feeling of release, he found himself writing with ease, exhilaration and a sense of mastery. No day was now long enough, and in the evenings, tired and at peace, he was content to listen by the hour to the superb new gramophone given him by his mother. He

wished she would not, her eye-brows raised high in apparent ecstasy, sway her head from side to side and swing her pointed toe in what she supposed to be in time to Beethoven just as if it were dance music, but he needed only to shut his eyes on this display of excessive sensibility and then he could almost cease upon the music. So now he had two escapes; music and writing, and in the little time occupied by neither he could afford to be kind to poor mother who tried so hard.

About the same time Felicity enjoyed several dreamless nights, and, coinciding with the improvement in Roy's spirits, this lucid interval restored her optimism. Eagerly she rushed to Madam Isis for corroboration of her hopes. A most satisfactory "consultation." She was assured the shadow over her life was about to lift.

"Yes, the cure is working. Mother-love is casting out fear. Your son is to be your saviour."

But alas, this happy interlude was followed by yet another turn of the screw. She had never suspected that the dream made her walk in her sleep. It was a badly sprained ankle that led to this disquieting discovery. Unable to put foot to ground, she had been laid up for two days when one night she was awakened by acute pain to find herself in her son's room and half-way towards his bed. Except for the dying firelight the room was dark and she had not disturbed him. But why was she there? And however did the bottle of amyl nitrate come to be in her hand? Was she in the habit of sleep-walking? (No wonder sleep sometimes took so much out of her!)

This discovery affected her most disagreeably and the despondency it induced sent her flying back to the palmist.

Another reassuring session.

Fast as water from a gutter flowed the soothing syrup. The darkest hour precedes the dawn; the wound is sorest just before it heals; when at the worst, affairs will mend and so on. Much comforted by such encouraging similes, Felicity was soon wholly reassured. Never had Madam been more definite.

"Your beautiful devotion is upholding your son. To your support he owes everything. Through your son deliverance will come to you."

After the sleep-walking incident Felicity locked both doors of her bedroom, but so far as she knew there was no reoccurrence and a spell of dreamless sleep soon made her omit this precaution.

Time now passed very quickly. Happily engrossed, Roy was still feverishly writing—overdoing it, the doctor said, but it was impossible to restrain him. During the ten months since its diagnosis he had had only one attack of angina. "Perhaps he will grow out of it," his mother, never able to realise his maturity, began to say to herself.

It was an exceptionally hot, dry summer. Before the end of July the grass was quite brown. One sultry morning in August, Felicity woke with a headache and, instead of going downstairs, lay in bed with a pad soaked in eau-de-Cologne on her forehead. Annoyed by a knock on the door, she wondered who had come to bother her. "Come in," she murmured resentfully.

"Excuse me, Ma'm, I've had an accident," confessed the housemaid, standing at the door with some pieces of broken glass in her hand. Dusting the table at the side of Roy's bed, she

had overturned the lamp; its fall had smashed the bottle that always stood there and all except one of Roy's "emergencies," as he always called the little tubes, were crushed. The car was just going into the town to fetch the fish so the chauffeur was told to call at the chemist's for a fresh supply of amyl nitrate. All that day Roy, the end of his book now well in sight, wrote in a frenzy. By tea-time he looked so over-wrought that Felicity tried hard to stop him, but he paid no attention and, bolting his door, wrote until the rough draft of his book was finished. When, three-quarters of an hour later, he joined his mother at dinner, he looked so flushed and excited that she snatched at his wrist. Yes, his pulse was very quick. Directly he had gulped down his soup and fish she persuaded him to go to bed. Half an hour later, passing through her own room on her way to visit him, the sight of the substitute bottle containing the one tube reminded her the new supply of amyl nitrate had not been brought upstairs. Annoyed, she rang for it.

To her distress she found Roy sitting bolt upright, writing hard.

"But I thought you'd finished!" she protested.

He told her he had had a "brain-wave" and must re-write the last two chapters. Before she could decide whether or not to try to stop him, there was an annoying interruption. The parlourmaid came in and most tactlessly blurted out in front of Roy that the chauffeur was very sorry but the chemist had quite escaped his memory and he'd been and gone and forgotten to fetch the medicine.

"What medicine?" asked Roy, who knew nothing of the morning's mishap.

"That what Lucy broke this morning when that lamp overbalanced," answered the maid, pointing to his bedside table. Only one medicine ever stood in that place.

"You mean my emergencies!" he said carelessly but, in spite of his broad grin Felicity thought she saw a flicker of anxiety in his eyes. Did he feel ill? All that writing?

"Does that mean there's nothing handy if my old ticker plays me up?" he asked, still grinning.

His mother assured him that she had one tube, and in any case he had those he always carried on him by day, hadn't he? Jauntily but rather shamefacedly he confessed those had fallen out of his pocket into the river when he took off his coat in the punt. She wanted the car to go back to the village at once. (Surely the chemist had a night-bell?) Roy derided such unnecessary fuss.

"Really, Mother. Considering I've had precisely one attack in twelve months, is it likely I should have two in one night? As a matter of fact what are the odds against my having even one attack once I'm safe in bed?

So the car was ordered to go first thing next morning. That matter settled, Felicity again implored Roy to stop writing. Seeming to acquiesce, he asked her to put on a record. As the strains of the *Fifth Symphony* filled the room Roy shut his eyes on the sight of his mother conducting the music, her long tapering fingers sawing the air all out of time, and burrowed down into his pillow as though settling himself for sleep. When the record ran down, she tripped across the room to remove it, and then, in deference to her son's well simulated yawns, tip-toed from the room.

The instant the door closed behind her, he sprang up and grabbed his writing things. Oblivious of time, he wrote on and on. It was towards dawn that he began to feel ill. Soon breathing became a conscious effort. It felt as if his heart were beating right up inside his head, struggling to get out. As last he desisted and tried to lie still, but did not turn out the light. Exhausted though he was, sleep would not come. Through his over-stimulated brain, streams of words chased after one another. Unfinished sentences wrote themselves across and across the ceiling. Key words broke away, writhed down the walls and hid themselves behind pictures. Now the writing was in red ink. Now in green. All capital letters now. Too many exclamation marks. Far too many! Wearied, he turned out the lamp. A spear of light penetrated where the curtains did not quite meet. Getting out of bed, he drew them wide apart. The blind was up and a gigantic moon shone into the room flooding it with a strange baleful light. Back in bed, he found moonlight even less conducive to sleep. Seizing his pen, he had another spurt of writing. A feverish spurt. His brain raced, his hand could not move fast enough. On. On. On. . . . At last, triumphant, he drew a long line and, with a great youthful flourish, in huge swashbuckler letters, wrote the word *Finis*.

Superb sense of achievement. A long, luxurious stretch. Now would sleep come? No, over-wound, he couldn't relax. Hopeless! He had just decided to get up and look for some Sedormid, when a slight sound drew his eyes to the door. To his surprise (his mother always knocked) its handle turned. In a second it had opened.

What he then saw gave him a horrible shock.

In her night-gown, her hair hanging loose, his mother walked into the room. But how utterly, uncannily unlike herself she looked! Her white face tense, but vacant, her wide-open eyes fixed, glassy, staring. Sleep-walkers should never be awakened, he had been told, so, with an effort, he constrained himself to lie quite still and silent, but he could hear his own quickened breathing, feel the *thump, thump* of his heart. She was coming straight towards him. Why had she got that little bottle in her hand? What was she going to do? . . . Now she was only about a yard from his bed. Suddenly she stopped and, tipping up the bottle, jerked it over the tiny blue-bordered pocket-handkerchief (a recent gift from him) held in her other hand. In a tight squeeze her hand closed over the handkerchief.

Two quick steps towards him, then suddenly she stopped still. A terrible expression of anguish came into her face, her body writhed. Whimpering, she seemed to be straining forward, straining with all her might, desperately trying to get to him, but it was as though some invisible force held her back. The awful inexplicable struggle went on and on; her face more and more wrung. At last, with a pitiful cry she seemed to break free, as if some invisible chain holding her back had suddenly snapped. Released, she sprang at him and pressed the handkerchief to his face. Though it had nearly all evaporated, he recognized the smell of amyl nitrate. So that was the cause of her sleep-walking! Poor mother! Always on tenterhooks for fear he might need his "emergencies". The constant anxiety, the dread of hearing the bell ring, must have strained her nerves more than he suspected. But now that she had gone through her part as nurse, he hoped the nervous disquiet would be stilled and

allow her to rest. Would she go back to bed? No, she still hung over him, her unseeing eyes wide with terror. A few more seconds and the terror on her face froze into despair. Then, wringing her hands, with a cry, she turned and fled. . . .

Perplexed and disquieted by the uncanniness of what he had seen, Roy became acutely conscious of the violent pounding of his heart and of a loud singing in his ears. A cold snake of fear uncoiled. Was he going to have an attack? Amyl nitrate? The last drops had just been wasted! For the first time he realized how much he relied on those magical little tubes. No life-belt now. No remedy!

At this thought, the awful sense of constriction increased until it approached suffocation. Then, radiating in every direction from his heart, sudden appalling pain shot right down his left arm. Spangled blackness welled up. Convulsed, he groped for the bell and just managed to press it. . . .

Moaning in her sleep, sick with horror at what she had again been compelled to do, his mother at the end of her nightmare, had just got back into bed, when the bell at her ear brought her to her feet, and straight into her son's room. Still only partially released from her dream, and hopelessly confused in time, she supposed the bell to have been rung by her husband.

The "second chance"—so often dreamt had actually come! She would save him. At last she would atone.

The shock of seeing not Roy's father, but Roy himself—Roy in agony, hurled her, now excruciatedly awake, into actuality. Two frantic strides and she was at his bed-side, her hand outstretched for the bottle. Not on the table? No, there on the floor!

Her shriek when she found the bottle empty was heard by everyone in the house. The sight of her own handkerchief last seen under her pillow and the crushed tube had brought instant realization of what the dream had made her do.

On her knees beside the bed, her arms flung round him, she clutched at her son, gripped him as if to hold him back. He could not speak—could scarcely breathe. Writhing, she was merged in the agony that convulsed him. Kicked off the bed, the manuscript, with the sprawled *Finis* uppermost, dropped on to the floor. . . . Now his darkening eyes looked at her but as if from the other side of a very wide and widening gulf. A drowning look came into them. Swirling black waters rose between him and her, rising, rising, to close over his head.

A final battle for breath. The battle stopped.

Now he lay quite still. No fear or anguish on his beautiful face now. It was peaceful and poignantly young.

The palmist's prediction was proved right. The son had brought about the mother's deliverance. At last the curse was lifted. Never again did the dream trouble her. For the rest of her long life, the nights were at empty as the days.

The White Moth

NEVER shall I forget my first sight of her! The incredible cocktail-party took place just after I came back from a business trip to the United States. Only the day before, I'd been to report to my employer, Mr. Whyte of the publishing firm of Whyte and Long, and had found the office seething with what promised to be the literary sensation of the century. The recent publication of a volume of poems by a new poet, a young girl. Mr. Whyte was almost the only publisher (he had ample private means) willing to lose money on what he thought good work, but this time he had, to quote his clerk, "backed a winner." For once verse was selling like an erotic novel. Handling the slender dove-grey volume with the utmost reverence, Mr. Whyte (he had grown quite thin from excitement) presented me with an inscribed copy of *Poems* by Evelyn Dawn. How old was she? Just nineteen, so he understood. No, he had not yet met the young genius (I wish I could convey the genuflexion in his voice at the word genius). Her real name—"but please don't

mention it") was Joyce Legge—(didn't I think he was well advised to insist on a *nom-de-plume*?) So far from seeing her, he had never so much as had a letter from her. All business had been transacted through an acquaintance of his wife's, a cousin of the girl poet (another vocal genuflection).

But tomorrow we should all have the privilege of seeing her. Yes, he was to give a party in her honour. Meanwhile I must of course read the poems and, he devoutly added, the *reviews*! Newspaper cuttings were pressed into my hands.

Strap-hanging on my homeward journey in the tube, I devoured the reviews; growing amazement making me quite oblivious to the lurching and swaying of the packed train. For once all critics were agreed, vying with one another in surely hysterical praise. With rising irritation I read the chorus of extravagant claims. "The greatest rehabilitator of words ever known"—"The mysticism of Francis Thompson"—"The music of Tennyson"—and so forth. What could this astounding unanimity mean? Was Joyce Legge (no wonder Mr. Whyte had renamed her) a mass hypnotist? . . .

But directly I got to bed I read the poems. I won't attempt to describe their effect. I can say only that that enraptured sleepless night was the greatest literary landmark in my life. I had travelled much in the realms of gold, but never before or since with so dazzling a sense of a new planet swum into my ken. Was it possible that this great new poet was only nineteen? I was now in an absolute fever to see the marvellous girl. I hardly knew how to get through the intervening hours.

Meanwhile, in my mind's eye I had already formed quite a distinct picture of Evelyn Dawn. Silver-fair hair, long narrow

white face, great shadowed eyes, wide tremulous mouth, flickering, never-still hands! That was how I visualised her.

Because of my connection with her publisher I am often asked whether I ever actually saw Evelyn Dawn. The year she blazed across the poetic sky, I was keeping a full diary for my future husband, then in India. The best way to tell all I know first-hand will be to copy word for word from this diary just those passages that describe our few meetings. This will give, unconfused by later ones, each impression as immediately received.

I begin with my account of the publisher's famous party.

Extract from Ruth Grey's Diary. March 2nd

Car misbehaved; so I arrived late. Room already hot and humming. Eagerly scanned serried guests. No one remotely resembling my picture of Evelyn Dawn. Cleaving my way through the crowd, I applied to my agitated hostess. "Over there," she answered, pointing a trembling hand, "in the green halo hat, being talked to by the *New Statesman* with the *Spectator* trying to chip in."

Though I know Mrs. Whyte not to be addicted to leg-pulling, really at first I couldn't believe her! Wedged in between two spectacled, domed little men, each of whom headed one of two colliding queues, now awkwardly swinging her arms, now tugging at her halo hat, stood a strapping, painfully flushed, beefy-looking girl, tightly compressed into a dress of stiff royal blue taffeta.

Evelyn Dawn? That opaque, lumpy creature? Impossible! Had it not registered such agony of shyness, surely it would

have been quite an inexpressive as well as commonplace face? School hockey (2nd Eleven) was what her whole appearance suggested. Yes, I could just picture her in a blue and grey gym tunic! But never in my life have I seen such an image of distress. More like some wretched netted creature at a cattle-market she looked, than the guest of honour at a literary party.

I couldn't take my eyes off her and, as I gaped, I noticed her distraught, darting glance continually reverted to a sofa on which a middle-aged couple were enthroned. Stout, self-important but obviously ill-at-ease, they sat bolt upright while their host, like a beater putting up game, drove up to them a succession of guests for contacts scarcely less brief than those of presentation at Court. "Her parents," whispered my hostess, in answer to my interrogative nudge.

Enthralled, I stared at the portly couple. Every few seconds they would glare at their daughter and vehemently nod their heads, while their mouths, that dumbly opened and shut, obviously shaped some unspoken, peremptory command. At each signalled admonition the expression on their daughter's face heightened into panic and, turning to her interlocutor of the moment, she would move her lips in brief mumbled speech.

No hope of getting presented yet but, elbowing my way through the crowd, I managed to get near enough to overhear snatches of what passed between the guest of honour and the succession of impatient guests (the two queues had now been marshalled into one) coming up for introduction in single file, each one allowed a brief inning before yielding to pressure from behind, before he must make way for whoever trod on his heels.

Eavesdropping, I overheard one redoubtable critic after another ply the celebrity with questions, and one after another I watched them retire baffled. Though the gathering was mainly literary, there was a considerable sprinkling of the laity, and ornamental ladies were pelting the wretched girl with all the usual inane and impertinent questions . . . "How did it come?"—"When would a second volume be ready?" "Was it her practice to write so many words or so many hours?"—"By day or by night?"—"In pencil or in ink?"—"Which did she find more helpful, tea or coffee?" Usually perplexed by a nervous "Pardon?" the girl's answers to this dreadful sort of quiz were breathless and brief. It depended.—Really she couldn't say.—She didn't mind which. Then, if her tormentor of the moment neither spoke nor withdrew, in renewed panic she would throw another agonised glance at her parents and in desperate obedience to their mouthed command "talk," blurt out something—anything—usually some wholly random question. I've never heard anything so painful. It was like one of those dreadful "confession books" become vocal. "Which do you like best, London or Country?" "Dogs or Cats?" "Red or Blue?"

Vehemently comparing notes, the backwash of guests broke over me, and jumbled snatches from the chorus of comment reached my ears. "*It can't be true!*"

"It *must* be a practical joke!"

"But the girl's a moron!"

"She can't talk, she can only perspire."

"Poor old Whyte's had his leg pulled!"

"I don't agree," broke in one dissenting voice. "I find an amusing sense of irony. She didn't bat an eye-lid when I quoted

Ella Wheeler. It's only that she's too shy to talk about her own work. After all, Emily would scarcely have shone at a cocktail party, would she?"

"But her face! Suet-pudding."

"Nature goes in for some very odd mis-binding."

At last my own turn came. As I approached for my brief audience I saw that when not contorted with social suffering her face might well be quite pleasing. Round eyes like blue marbles, fresh complexion, wide amiable mouth. Something rather engaging about her healthy appearance if only one could forget its crazy incongruity with one's preconception of Evelyn Dawn. I grasped her hot hand and, determined to avoid any special bowling, said the very first thing that came into my head—an unfavourable comment on the climate of the room.

"Awful, isn't it?" she agreed, with a look of fervent relief. Obviously braced for a hard ball, she was touchingly grateful for my lob.

"How long will it take?" she asked.

"Six to eight we're invited. It's seven-fifteen now."

She gave a gasp and wiped her beaded brow.

"Trying functions these, I always think; especially for those who don't drink," I said, relieving her of the all but empty glass of orangeade, trickles of which (shyness made her movements jerky) coursed down her dress; a piece of officiousness I repented for she looked so much at a loss to know what to do with her now disengaged hand. She told me she had never been to a cocktail party before. Surprised, I asked if she lived in the country.

Yes, Mother and she came "up to town" for a few days

Xmas shopping and "did some shows" and Father took her to the Military Tournament. Otherwise they always lived at Henley. "Balmoral" was the name of their house.

While our conversation continued just very plain answers to very plain questions the look of strain left her face, and there were no more panicky glances shot at her parents. Indeed, when I asked her if she liked dogs, she looked positively happy, but the respite could not be long. I had already exceeded my ration of time and must make way for successors.

The queue champing at my heels was headed by a tiny myopic gnome—the most dreaded reviewer of the day. Never before had I seen deference on that irascible face.

My arm was clutched and I felt a warm little tickle in my ear as, fearfully eyeing the pundit, she whispered "Who's that coming up? Is he very highbrow?"

Highbrow? A naïve label from the acclaimed idol of the critics, especially when pronounced "haybrow."

"One of your most enthusiastic admirers," I whispered back. (Obviously the most curdling description I could have given.) "Don't go!" she implored, clinging to my arm. It felt just like abandoning someone to drown, but there was no help for it, I had to move off.

Determined to hover near enough to overhear my successor's opening gambit, I had just caught the words "Donne," "Fourth Dimensional," and something like "Am I right in thinking you read Milton before Shakespeare?" when, alas! a voluble acquaintance deafened me with his impressions of the "reluctant lioness," as he called the unhappy girl. He had just had his audience and declared himself dumbfounded (a most misleading description of his condition!) by her talk and prosaic ap-

pearance. Striking ugliness he could have permitted, but really did you ever see anyone more utterly commonplace? Why, you wouldn't think her capable of so much as reading, let alone writing her own poems!

Unfortunately an early dinner engagement took me away long before the party ended.

All through the evening my thoughts circled in bewilderment round Evelyn Dawn, or rather Joyce Legge, for it was by her own rather than her writing name that I caught myself thinking of the poor "reluctant lioness," so strangely difficult was it to associate the impression she made with the ineffable beauty and strangeness of her poems.

Now, before I go to sleep, I shall read the little book right through again.

2.30 A.M.

So great is their spell that from the moment I began to re-read the poems, the strange anomaly of the girl's appearance and talk entirely faded from my mind. Not once did Joyce Legge's face come between me and the pages. No effort to reconcile the writer with her work interfered with my rapt appreciation. In fact, all memory of the party entirely faded from my mind. So much so that, oddly enough, the pale oval of my imagined Evelyn Dawn's face again swam unsummoned into my vision; so delicate—so softly, flutteringly sensitive a face that somehow I found myself thinking of a white moth—a haunting queerly persistent image because when at last I slept I actually dreamt of a white moth.

Why a white moth?

Now many pages of my diary have to be turned for my second meeting with Joyce Legge which was not until July.

During the intervening months the "girl-poet" remained the number one topic of the reading world. Literary periodicals were hungrily scanned for a new Evelyn Dawn poem, and it was known that the more popular ones had offered fabulous sums for the privilege of featuring her, but nothing appeared.

Meanwhile all invitations, both private and public, were refused. So far from consenting to take the chair at the Literary Fund dinner, Evelyn Dawn had not since the party been seen by anyone in London. Resolutely the new star refused to shine.

Gradually poor Mr. Whyte grew perturbed. He had hoped quickly to follow up his "epoch-making" publication with another volume, however "slim." All his letters to the "girl-poet" were answered by her mother who, the flowing hand-writing copiously informed him, was "taking everything off" her daughter so as to enable her entirely to devote herself to her "literary work." Very soon more poems would be sent.

On the strength of these assurances Mr. Whyte rashly embarked on intensive advance advertisement. The name of Evelyn Dawn topped his autumn list. Months passed. Still nothing to hand. By July the poor man was in a fever. On various pretexts his offers to Mrs. Legge to visit her daughter were put off. No, Joyce must not be disturbed. He must have patience. He had patience, plenty of it, but by the end of July it was exhausted. Evelyn Dawn must, as he put it, "be contacted." His wife, now being critically ill, he was unable to leave London himself, so I was commissioned to force my way into "Balmoral" and contrive a personal interview. Better not say I was coming, but take

two days' holiday at Henley and on the strength of my introduction at the party pay a formal call at "Balmoral."

Extract from Diary

31st July. River View Hotel, Henley

At four o'clock I stood on the gamboge yellow gravel outside "Balmoral," a goggling villa of parti-coloured brick profusely coated with Virginia creeper. The drive encircled a round flower-bed tightly packed with scarlet salvia edged with cherry-pie. How oddly I thought, as I rang its bell, this house (its protuberant windows gave it a look of excess thyroid) will one day wear the commemoration tablet proclaiming it the "Birth-place of Evelyn Dawn."

The pursed lips of the regal parlourmaid made me fear "Not at home," but without demur I was requested to step this way. Mrs. Legge, I was told, was in the "Lounge."

Engaged in raffia work for an impending bazaar, Mrs. Legge sat teed up on a stoutly upholstered sofa covered in brocade the colour of her salvias. Cushions of precisely the same shade as the cherry-pie told of the consistency of her taste in colour schemes. Overcrowded tables glittered with arrays of silver-framed photographs. Naturally my own name conveyed nothing to my hostess. Confusedly conscious of deeply embedded flashing rings, multitudinous bangles, violet scent, and creaking corsets, I shyly explained myself.

At the name of Whyte and Long, gratification and embarrassment contended in her face, the congested complexion of which recalled the hues common both to her flower-bed and her sofa.

I was glad to see she liked a good tea. A second cup was

brought and after a short conversational skirmish she became very communicative.

Putting it into the third person, I will write down what she told me about her famous daughter.

The whole thing had been such a surprise. "So unexpected." Previously they had not really "held with girls writing"—(Mr. Legge liked a woman to be a woman)—but when, at the instigation of their nephew—an "awfully clever" young man, their daughter's "pieces of poetry" had got published and created such a stir, they had, I gathered, readjusted their views and prepared to make the most of a disguised blessing. And now Joyce's failure to turn out "more of the stuff," (Mrs. Legge spoke as though her daughter were a disobliging hen who refused to lay more eggs), was a source of increasing annoyance.

"Plain lazy. That's what Joyce is," declared the injured mother.

I made vague sounds of sympathy and, conscious of inanity, mumbled something about the difficulty of harnessing Pegasus; but neither this nor my next effort, in which I reminded her that a poet had been defined as a "reed through which a God pipes fitfully," kindled any sympathy in my hostess's face.

She dismissed my mixed metaphors with a snort. Joyce had "done it before." She could do it again. Why not make up her mind to write so many lines a day? Obviously writing, like knitting, was considered merely a question of good will. You set yourself a certain number of lines of poetry instead of rows of wool and jolly well stuck to your undertaking until it was done. What, Mrs. Legge would like to know, would happen to the bazaar if she failed to get through her work?

I soon gathered that their daughter's refusal to avail herself

of her social opportunities exasperated the Legges even more than her failure to produce more poems. Evidently they had hoped to be swept by the wind in her sails into the glamorous circles so well known to them through the pages of the *Sketch* and the *Tatler*. But ever since the "lovely party given by that nice gentlemanly publisher" the mere idea of "going anywhere" seemed to make the silly girl quite ill. Really, they didn't know what to do with her.

Tentatively I probed into Joyce's past. Had she begun to write at a very early age? Not so far as anyone *knew*, but then the girl was so reserved about her gift (Mrs. Legge made this wonderfully acid) that one couldn't say. At any rate she had always been very fond of reading poetry and, encouraged by her governess, used to copy out her favorite "pieces." Would I care to see her album? With a clash of bangles she handed me a fat, metal-clasped book bound in cerise limp leather with *Joyce's Book* embroidered on it in white beads. Thrilled, I turned its variegated tinted pages. What did I find? About forty of the most orthodox schoolroom hacks neatly copied out, each one of them either definitely narrative or else robustly didactic. Here indeed was a puzzling exhibit for the future Evelyn Dawn museum! Mystified, I was utterly at a loss what to think or say. Pretending to concentrate on *Young Lochinvar*, I was racking my brains how best to further my mission when Mrs. Legge's raised voice made me shut the book with a bang and look up at the French window just in time to see her daughter, hockey stick in hand, step into the room.

"Come along, Joyce, Miss Grey from Whyte and Long, has come to see us."

At the name of Whyte and Long the girl gave the equivalent

of a violent shy but, recognizing me, looked relieved, wrung my hand and seized a cream bun. At that moment, most opportunely, Mrs. Legge was summoned to the telephone. Free from social tension, the girl's healthy face was very pleasant, and the expression in her round blue eyes showed grateful recollection of the lucid interval provided by me at the party. I decided to begin on something quite impersonal. Propped up against the piano, the hockey stick supplied an opening and our exchange of views on that game was quite fluent. Soon I was honoured with a private view of a really spectacular bruise above her knee. Would I care to see the hockey-field? Such a "ripping" spot. Snatching up another cream bun, she piloted me past bed after bed of bloated looking begonias and through and out of the well-stocked kitchen garden. Still strictly avoiding anything remotely approaching shop, I duly admired the arena of her physical prowess and gave the expected appropriate exclamation of wonder when shown the exact spot from which she had hit the winning goal.

On our way back, I ventured to throw out a feeler. I did not want to intrude, but how was she getting on with the so eagerly awaited new poems? Another violent shy, and, bulging with bun as they were—her cheeks crimsoned. A sheepish mumble. Really, she couldn't say; then, desperately evasive, she pelted me with questions. Obviously for the present it was useless to press, and after allowing her a little time to recover, I invited her to a film followed by tea at my hotel tomorrow. "Thanks most awfully."

Fortunately before leaving I remembered to say good-bye to the mother and was asked to come again.

I feel more flummoxed than ever. It's too extraordinary! How

can she appear so irreconcilably unlike what anyone could possibly expect—so utterly unsophisticated, and commonplace? Is it conceivable that the whole thing is an elaborate pose? And if so, what on earth for? To what possible purpose? To defend herself from "Haybrow" talk? Scarcely believable. No, it's all quite unaccountable.

Evening of following Day

Joyce (I find I can think of her only by her baptismal name) met me at the cinema. When at last the lavish entertainment ended, we went to my hotel, and she showed as robust an appetite for food as for films. While she devoured cake after cake, we had a heart-to-heart about dogs. In a burst of confidence she told me someone had said she was "as good as a vet," and then modestly added, "But I think we all of us have one gift, don't you?" My teaspoon dropped with a clang. *One* gift? And that for dogs! Was she deliberately pulling my leg? The expression on the round face gravely masticating a chocolate éclair was quite unselfconscious. Indeed so much at ease, so off her guard did she appear that I felt now was the time for another attempt. Might I not be allowed to see some of her work, however unfinished? I should be so grateful for the merest glimpse. Had she nothing to show me?

Again I was reminded of a sturdy cob shying, and had it been possible I knew my guest would have bolted.

"No, nothing at all," she mumbled, nervously cramming the last oozing fragments of éclair into her mouth and working off her embarrassment on another by hewing it into minute fragments with her fork.

"I expect you never like anyone to see a poem before you are quite quite satisfied with it?" I hazarded.

Joyce gulped and wiped her mouth.

"No, it isn't that," she blurted out. "It's just that it hasn't happened again."

I gaped at her.

"It hadn't *happened* again?"

What an extraordinary way of putting it! It seemed to deny any conscious agency. What could she mean? Does she want to suggest she's subject to some mysterious visitation? Oh dear! Oh dear! surely she isn't hinting at automatic writing, planchette or whatever they call the tomfoolery?

Embarrassed, I dropped the subject, and reverted to the relative charms of Labradors and setters. Soon she was quite at ease again and telling my fortune from tea-leaves.

Nice news to bring back to her publisher! So far from being on the point of delivery, obviously Evelyn Dawn's next volume is not even begun! Here indeed is a reed through which a god pipes fitfully. However, after a lulling interlude of dog talk, by judicious pumping I did extract one interesting fact. "It" hadn't ever "happened" at "Balmoral." All the "pieces of poetry" had got written while she was staying in an old Cotswold house taken by Papa two years ago for the summer holidays. No, she didn't like "Grey Gables" and was sorry Papa had taken it again for this August and September.

Despairing of any further disclosure, I walked her home and by shameless pandering to Mrs. Legge's self-importance, cadged an invitation to stay at "Grey Gables" in about a month's time. Something achieved!

Before I left, on the pretext of needing a safety pin, I contrived to inspect Joyce's bedroom—Brass bedstead, "fancy"

eiderdown embellished with satinfruit, embossed silver brushes; books—*Little Women*, *John Halifax*, *Gentlemen*, two royal biographies, *The Home Vet*, *Ella Wheeler Wilcox*, etc. Pictures (fox brushes draped over the tops of their frames), *The Monarch of the Glen*, and two enlarged coloured photographs of Papa and Mamma.

Much too tired and bewildered to try to sort out my impressions. Don't know what to think or feel.

My interview with Mr. Whyte was enjoyed by neither of us. He had hoped I would bring at least the assurance that the next consignment of poems would soon be forthcoming. Cross-examining me on my embassy to the "girl-poet" (he winced when I called her Joyce Legge), he seemed to think I had wasted my time but was somewhat mollified when I told him of my invitation to Grey Gables.

Meanwhile, he briskly set himself to arrange for the appearance of various discreet little paragraphs to the effect that, owing to the unprecedented height of Evelyn Dawn's standard, the impatient reading-world must wait yet a little longer for her second volume.

I now skip six weeks of journal for the account of my visit to Grey Gables.

Grey Gables, August 15th.

Arrived here in time for tea. The greatest conceivable contrast to "Balmoral." Exquisite, quite unspoiled Elizabethan manor-house. Atmosphere almost oppressively strong; seeming in an aloof stately way to repudiate Mrs. Legge's few imported household goods as well as herself. She received me with

affable condescension and sumptuous tea, but with the news that Joyce was laid up with an ankle sprained playing, so she grumbled, that "nasty rough hockey." She intended to get the child out of bed tomorrow; meantime, ("unfortunately Mr. Legge was away") I must put up with a "tate-a-tate" dinner with her. With rather wan pride (evidently she found it no "home from home") she expatiated on the great antiquity of the house. It had belonged to the same family for, as she put it, "Donkey's ears," until this "wicked taxation." "Sheer robbery, Mr. Legge calls it,"—had forced them to put it into the hands of the agent.

As soon as I had been shown my own imposing bedroom, I was conducted to Joyce's, my hostess parting from me at its door. A superb room, but to my taste too uncompromisingly "period" for comfort. Beamed ceiling, uneven floor, small mulioned windows, the dressing-table a converted spinet, the misted mirror beautiful but not beautifying. The best piece of furniture, an attractive pigeon-holed walnut writing bureau, was of much later date.

Joyce, looking very much like a transplanted flower or rather vegetable—lay on the extreme edge of the vast bed. And what a bed! A cumbrously carved four-poster with fusty hangings, oppressively like all the beds alleged to have been slept in by Queen Elizabeth. A red rope barrier and a placard forbidding sight-seers to touch would be quite in keeping.

My first glance round the majestic room took in the only objects that could be called personal. The hockey-stick, the commonplace-book, some framed photographs of pets, and a huge tome called *The Dog-Lovers' Manual*.

Joyce seemed really pleased to see me. She positively beamed and introduced me to her new fox-terrier.

"I call him 'Spot'," she said, with a little deprecatory giggle at her own flight of fancy. As my visit was to last a week I decided for the time being to steer clear of the subject of poetry. We talked of her accident. I gathered the injury was not serious, and really very welcome as an excuse to evade some ghastly functions accepted by her mother. Anyway, she would be down tomorrow and looked forward to taking me to local cinemas. We would have "lots of fun." The boom of the dressing-gong (Mrs. Legge had warned me it would be "sounded" half an hour before dinner) sent me to my bath, but Joyce had urged me to leave Mother to her "silly old game of *Patience*" and return as soon as possible.

Not once between the richly port-wined soup and the over-mustarded "Angels on Horseback" did I hear time's winged chariot hurrying near. Mrs. Legge was very informative as to which of the families in the neighborhood were or were not "county," but the darkness of my ignorance as to the meaning of that mysterious designation remained un-illuminated. Of her daughter, evidently much out of favour, she spoke little.

"So unsociable. So unobliging. Mr. Legge can't make her out either."

"Unobliging," I gathered, referred to the girl's stubborn refusal to make use of her "great gift."

Poor Mr. Whyte! Evidently Evelyn Dawn's muse is still in total eclipse.

When at last we rose from the table, Mrs. Legge went to inspect her disappointing daughter and returned flushed and

exasperated. No, I could not visit Joyce tonight. She had come over quite queer and must be kept very quiet. By cautious questioning I learned that Joyce's "silly fit" had been brought on by the news, until now carefully kept from her, that in two days' time she must attend a luncheon party given in her honour by the local Literary Society. The absurd child had thrown herself into a regular "state" and declared herself too ill to fulfill the engagement. "But," grumbled her incensed mother, "if you ask me I think she's putting it on because, believe it or not, she doesn't *want* to go! But go she must," she added, wreaking her annoyance on the cards she was shuffling, and declaring her intention of sending for the doctor tomorrow. Shamming was a thing she would not stand, no, thank you, and between me and her and the gate-post she didn't believe there ever had been much wrong with Joyce's ankle. Only this morning she had gone into her room unexpectedly and surprised the child walking about with scarcely a limp.

I said I understood many writers found social engagements too distracting from their work.

"But she's not writing!" she snapped. "She can't get it both ways."

Cut off from my living enigma I felt maddeningly thwarted, but did not dare disobey my hostess, and had to spend the evening helping her with her Patience. Seeing no hope of bed before that maddening Miss Millighan "came out," I soon learned to look the other way whenever she cheated herself.

August 6th.

This has been the queerest and most bewildering day. Unsanctioned by her mamma, I called on Joyce before breakfast.

She was very sorry, but she couldn't get up. She'd had a rotten night and something had made her ankle worse. Really and truly, she couldn't put it to the ground. Also she felt very queer "in herself."

She certainly looked unwell, flushed and strained, with dark rings under her eyes.

Rotten luck she couldn't take me to the movies but, anyway, she wouldn't be able to go to that ghastly luncheon, would she? And I would come and sit with her, wouldn't I?

I found Mrs. Legge at the breakfast-table. She was flushed with rage, and had I been a good friend I should have said: "Don't let the food go down on your wrath," but I didn't, and she made the great mistake of consuming a vast breakfast in a state of annoyance acute enough to invalidate the digestion of an ostrich. Between rapid mouthfuls she told me she did not intend to have her leg pulled. The doctor would soon settle Joyce's nonsense. Yes, she had sent for him and I should hear for myself what he said.

To Mrs. Legge's disgust, the very old doctor, a nice little man with sad, experienced eyes, fully confirmed Joyce's claim to be treated as an invalid. The luncheon party was quite out of the question. Quite apart from her ankle, the young lady was in a very over-wrought state and must be kept quiet. He would send a sedative. Still unconvinced, Mrs. Legge, now suffering from that ill-advised breakfast, was obliged to acquiesce and cancel the engagement. Personally, I thought poor Joyce's panic at the prospect of the Literary Luncheon quite enough to account for her condition. After all, I reminded myself (for really, I often catch myself forgetting who Joyce really is!), how could Evelyn Dawn possibly be anything but highly-strung?

Determined to penalise her daughter's illness, Mrs. Legge insisted on her resting with the curtains drawn all the afternoon, but after tea I was allowed in. Though she expressed great relief at her reprieve, she still looked very strained. The double life of the creative artist? This optimistic explanation flashed into my mind. Why not broach the subject, lightly—playfully? "I believe you've been exhausting yourself writing," I said, in an, I fear, rather arch "I'm on Tom Tiddler's ground" sort of voice.

Her face crimsoned.

"What makes you think that?" she asked, breathlessly. "There won't be any more writing."

At that moment the afternoon post was brought in. Joyce's correspondence included two bills. It was, she explained, her invariable practice to pay all bills by return. (I took up my cue for a murmur of envious admiration) so, as the post was just going, would I please get her cheque-book out of the right-hand top-drawer of the bureau. Also a little red account book. She had already told me she kept a record of every single penny spent.

"Would you like to look at my accounts?" she asked, a little complacently when she had made her entry. Eagerly I took the little book into my hands. Its left-hand pages were headed "Bills Paid," those on the right "Petty Cash." "Petty" was indeed the word: Buns 2d; . . . Ladies 1d; . . . *Punch* 6d; . . . Offertory 3d, etc., etc.

Enthralled, I turned the pages.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked. I suppose the irony (what would the poor publisher think if he knew?) of this

absurd account-book being the one and only Evelyn Dawn manuscript I had succeeded in laying hands on made me grin.

Before I had answered I heard myself give an audible gasp of excitement and, idiot that I was, an exclamation of triumph. On the last turned page, instead of figures, I saw several lines of lightly pencilled writing—obviously *verse*! Alas, before I had had time to decipher more than two or three words the cripple had sprung out of bed and snatched the book from my hands.

"A poem! A poem!" I cried, wildly elated.

"I thought I'd torn it all up," she blurted out, taken off her guard.

"Then you have been writing again?" I pressed relentlessly.

Breathlessly, I waited for some disclosure. Meantime, she had scrambled back in bed and the book was buried under the blankets.

"It began to happen again as soon as I got back here," she faltered. "I've been having the most awful nights, but I didn't want anyone to know. . . . Don't tell mamma!" she implored, and, arching herself up in bed, she shoved the book right under the small of her back.

I promised silence and tried to conceal my scepticism. It seemed to me this extraordinary business must be an elaborate plant? Surely she must have wanted me to find the verse? This professed imperative necessity instantaneously to pay a bill even with a visitor in the room, was really a bit too unconvincing. And why make me look at those preposterous accounts? But whatever could be the point of such deception? To relieve the tension I felt, I began to prowls about the room, while, de-

terminated to discover the truth, by insistent questions I gradually coaxed from her the story (surely a "story" in every sense of the word?) of her authorship.

Putting it into the third person and omitting my own interruptions I will summarize her narrative.

When they first came to Grey Gables she was given the same bedroom. No, she had never liked it. She couldn't exactly explain why, but somehow she never felt really *alone* in it. She had always been such a sound sleeper—didn't know what it was to have a bad night, but the very first time she slept in this great bed, she kept waking up feeling ever so disturbed and distressed. "Right down restless." Yes, queer impulses forced her to get up and walk about the room or stand at the open window and stare at the moon! Silly, wasn't it? The second night she woke up with a start just as the church clock donged three. She felt frightfully cold, and it was ever such a shock to find herself not in bed but at the writing-bureau by the open window. A pencil dropped from her hand and, to her amazement, she saw in front of her two sheets of note-paper covered with writing. . . . Yes, it was her handwriting—much smaller and more slanting than usual, but recognizable, and anyway, no one else had been in the room. But why and how could she have written in her sleep? *Poetry*, too!

She felt ever so tired—and longed to get back into bed, but it was as though something held her back, and it was some minutes before she could overcome this queer sense of resistance. Perplexed and in some muddled way ashamed, she tore up the two sheets of paper and threw the pieces into the waste-paper-basket. Next night, very much the same thing recurred. And then

it happened again and again and again. Morning after morning she would find more of the "funny stuff" had got written. Often she would wake to find herself at the bureau, but sometimes it was not until she saw the writing in the morning that she knew she had left her bed. No, she didn't remember any actual dream, but often went to sleep with the sense of struggling to resist some compulsion that made her, so to speak, "Want against her will to get up." She always tucked herself in as tightly as possible and often fell asleep clinging to the bed-clothes.

Did she tell her parents? Oh, no! She would never have dreamt of such a thing. They didn't like anything they couldn't understand. And how could she explain what she couldn't understand herself? What *could* it be? Yes, of course she had heard of sleep-writing! Why should anything so awfully queer happen to her, of all people?

On no account would she have told anyone; no one would ever have known, and then she would have escaped all the misery and embarrassment (such a dreadfully false position) if only it hadn't been for—

Just at this point her story was cut short by Mrs. Legge's entry and I was evicted. Maddening interruption!

And then after dinner I was told Joyce had a temperature and must not be visited. So here I am in a state of suspended animation. What *can* it mean? Is the whole thing a deliberate hoax? Have the Legges got hold of someone else's manuscript? If so, is Joyce deliberately in the plot? Scarcely credible. Could anyone fake that really rather endearing naïvete? I doubt it. Is the poor girl (she does seem very frightened of her mother) an

unwilling tool coerced by imposter parents? Was that extraordinary rigmarole—she spoke like someone saying a lesson learned by heart—some moonshine they had instructed her to repeat to me? And if so, *why?* Why? Why? Can they want me to infer some sort of mediumistic nonsense—some mysterious control? Certainly if such things did exist the very blankness of the girl's own mind would make her a very easily requisitionable vehicle. . . .

Then again, suppose the girl's account is what she really believes to have happened, how on earth, since she always tore up the writing, did the poems ever get discovered?

I shan't sleep a wink from impatience to get the rest of her story.

Evening of next day

Well, I've succeeded in extracting the rest of Joyce's story, but I am more mystified than ever.

Directly after breakfast I flew to the sick-room. I'll write down this interview in dialogue. I can remember it word for word:

"Good night, Joyce?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Grey. Actually I feel much better, but please don't tell Mamma."

"No sleep-writing?"

"No, thank you, Miss Gray. At least, not that I know of, but you see I had burnt up every scrap of paper in the room."

"Oh! You mustn't do that!" I exclaimed appalled, and then, trying to conceal my concern, went on in the most casual voice I could command: "Do tell me how the secret of the mysterious writing came out. Did you forget to tear some of it up?"

"No," she answered, hesitatingly and then the words gushed out in that queer sort of voice. "Actually it was the most extraordinary fluke. You see, Miss Grey, my cousin was staying with us at the time and because he knew I loved a good paperchase, he was getting up an enormous surprise one for my birthday. So what do you think, Miss Gray? For weeks he had been collecting all the scraps of paper thrown into the wastepaper baskets to put into sacks. I suppose when I tore up the writings I must have left rather big pieces. Anyway some fragments of poetry caught his eye and, would you believe it, he took the trouble to piece together hundreds and hundreds of bits of paper—like a jig-saw puzzle—till he could read quite a lot of—er—what had got written in my bedroom. Then, ever so excited, he brought the—er—things to me. You know he's awfully keen on poetry and all that sort of thing, Miss Grey. Really quite terribly brainy," she added with a shudder.

"What did you say then, Joyce?"

"I didn't know what to do for the best, Miss Grey. Really I didn't. You see, in a way I couldn't say I hadn't written the things and yet it didn't seem right to let him think I had. Anyway he wouldn't believe me when I tried to explain that I wasn't really at all responsible. No, he would go on about what he called the morbid modesty of the world's best camouflaged genius; and so—wasn't it awful?—he went and gave the pieces of poetry to his friend, Mr. Whyte's wife, and then, if you please, Miss Grey, he showed—oh! I shall never forgive him for that!—Mr. Whyte's letter asking to publish them, to Papa, and I was in the most awful hole. Really, I began to think I must be mad! My cousin settled everything and all of a sudden the pa-

pers were all full of me in ever such large print with pictures of me, too, and then came that ghastly party when you were so awfully decent to me, and ever since then everything's been too awful. Really, I don't get any peace, and I simply don't know how to answer when people will talk clever to me. I feel such a fool and in ever such a false position, too, and that's such an uncomfortable thing, isn't it, Miss Grey? Yet if I said I hadn't written the things, they'd think I was mad, wouldn't they? What ever am I to do? You're so clever, Miss Grey, can't you think of some way of getting me out of this awful stew?"

To gain time while I considered how best to lay hands on some more Evelyn Dawn poems whatever their origin, I was pretending to be absorbed in trying to soothe the extraordinary girl when suddenly I made the most thrilling discovery. At Joyce's request I had just crossed the room to open the window, when with a violent start (thank heaven I managed to suppress any audible gasp of excitement) I caught sight of some marks on the white distempered wall.

Pencilled writing!

Verses?

With beating heart I approached near enough to read. Yes, two verses of six lines each! Above them the words *The White Moth (a revision)*.

As I read, I felt a sharp pain in my throat and the words swam through a blur of tears—the kind of tears that spring from the sudden stabbing sense of supreme beauty. Unmistakably the exquisite beginning of an authentic Evelyn Dawn poem!

Of course I said nothing, but instantly made up my mind I must either copy or memorize the lovely fragment. I knew I should never be able to write unnoticed, so, muttering some-

thing about a shoe-lace, I crouched on the floor and, ostensibly busied with my foot, set myself to learn as much as I could of *The White Moth*. It wouldn't have taken me long to learn all there was of it—when—in came that infernal mother, followed by the doctor, and out I had to go!

While it's still fresh in my mind I am dashing all this down before lunch. After tea I am to see Joyce again, and then, somehow or other, I absolutely must contrive to learn the precious fragment by heart and also think out some plan for garnering tonight's harvest, if any.

Night of Same Day

Of course the moment I set foot in Joyce's room, without so much as a glance in her direction, my eyes searched the wall. Bitter disappointment! The writing was gone. Joyce must have rubbed it out—and alas! I can't remember any of it—at least, only one line. . . .

Now, how was I to set about the recovery of that lovely, tantalising fragment? Better not let Joyce know I had seen it, but try to talk of other things while cudgelling my brains to think of some inducement to make her keep paper and pencil at hand tonight and above all promise not to destroy any writing she might find in the morning. But my ignorance as to whether I had to deal with (1) a fraud; (2) an extraordinary case of split personality; (3) some inexplicable mysterious outside agency (a supposition against which my obstinate rationalism revolts), made it terribly difficult to know what kind of tactics to adopt. And suppose Joyce's story is what she believes to be the truth, how to rescue the poor girl from her parents?

But I couldn't bother about her sufferings yet. The one im-

portant thing was by hook or crook to get hold of some more Evelyn Dawn poems. Could I somehow contrive to spend a night in her room? If only she were more ill and the doctor would say she mustn't be left alone! But then, if the whole affair is a hoax, of course nothing could happen with me in the room.

Is it conceivable the cousin wrote the poems himself and for some inexplicable reason wishes to conceal the fact? No, they are essentially feminine—super-feminine. I'm more inclined to entertain the fantastic idea—it occurred to me yesterday—that the fraudulent parents, finding their daughter simply cannot act the part of anyone conceivably capable of writing the poems, have now decided to try to make her out a medium as the only credible explanation of how they came to be written by her. If this is the case no doubt they are bullying the wretched creature into compliance.

With all these conjectures revolving in my head, I chatted away to Joyce, who showed no signs of noticing my preoccupation and babbled of dogs, hockey, London shows and of how glad she would be to leave this "mouldy old house" and return to "Balmoral" where she had her "wizard" ponies and was secretary to the Tail-Waggers' Club. As always, she seemed the most amiable and simplest girl I'd ever met. Is she the world's greatest actress? Never have I felt so utterly non-plussed. I had to say goodnight—she implored me not to go and seemed to hate being left alone in that great, somehow unhappy room—before I had thought out any definite scheme. Tomorrow, however, I must do something really decisive. But *what*? One thing I'm determined on—to way-lay that nice perceptive-

looking old doctor and see if I can't get something out of him. The odd thing is that whatever she is or isn't, I can't help feeling a real sort of affection for Joyce as she appears to be.

Little as I expected it, that frustrating interview was the last time I ever saw Joyce Legge. First thing next morning I was summoned to my mother's bed-side (she had had a terrible motor accident) and I had to dash off without any goodbyes. My mother's condition kept me with her for six weeks, and by that time the Legges had long left Grey Gables. I had one nice, very ordinary letter from Joyce. She was sorry about my mother. She hoped to see me again soon. Her ankle was recovered and she feared resuscitation of literary luncheon. Spot had distemper and so on.

I had just decided to go to the hotel at Henley and call at "Balmoral" when, early in October, all the newspapers burst into their largest, blackest types:

"EVELYN DAWN MISSING"

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF GIRL POET!"

"POETESS VANISHES ON EVE OF LUNCHEON IN HER HONOUR!"

"BEREAVED PARENTS DENY ALL KNOWLEDGE"

Never had there been a greater sensation.

Apart from the bitter, baffling loss of Evelyn Dawn, whoever or whatever she might be, my own feelings were complicated by a real concern for the fate of Joyce Legge. Weeks slid into months.

No clue.

I could not face the Legge parents, but more and more I

felt impelled to attempt some investigation. What could I do? Suddenly I remembered that nice discerning-looking old doctor. Might I be able to get something out of him? It seemed the one chance. Why not go to Henley, fake an illness and call him in? Acting on impulse, I telegraphed for a room. One last extract from my diary gives my interview with Joyce's doctor.

December 2nd

Dr. Lane came this morning. I think I can write down every word that passed between us. He remembered me at once. Our eyes had repeatedly met over Mrs. Legge's absurdity, and he seemed little concerned with my reported palpitations. Something in the expression of his sagacious, kindly old eyes, told me he guessed the real reason for my summons and assured me I need fear no pompous medical etiquette. Discretion would not seal his lips. Not that he had much to tell me about Joyce Legge as a patient. He had seen her only twice, but any impressions he had formed he was very ready to impart. Though age had made him slow of speech his mind was still quick, and he was amusing at Mrs. Legge's expense.

"No wonder her daughter wanted to disappear," he ended his diatribe, "though how she brought off her vanishing trick, I can't imagine."

"Tell me, Dr. Lane—of course I won't repeat anything you say, but was that girl malingering or not?"

He smiled.

"That, Miss Grey, is as you like to put it. She wanted so much to be ill that she had made herself really ill. By-the-by, to turn the tables, can you tell me *why* she wanted to be ill?"

"But don't you know?" I asked, amazed.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't a notion. You see I don't get much time for reading—not even the reviews. Believe it or not, until she disappeared I hadn't ever heard of Evelyn Dawn. I'd no idea my patient was a celebrity and certainly I should never have guessed it."

Briefly I told him of poor Joyce's agonising shyness, the torture her publicity had been to her; to what extent she shrank from social functions and how her mother was always bullying her to go out as well as to write—neither of which she wanted to do.

"Didn't she want to write?"

"No."

"Well, well, there's no end to the contrariness of the human race, is there? I always say that one half my patients want—however, that's neither here nor there. . . . So that girl's parents wanted her to write, and it was she who didn't want to, was it? Queer irony to think it was in that very same room over fifty years ago that I attended . . . !" He paused and his old eyes widened and misted with memories as he stared back into his youth.

"You attended whom?"

"A poor thwarted slip of a girl who was eating her heart out to write and her parents wouldn't let her."

"Wouldn't let her write?" I echoed. "How could they stop her?"

"Things were very different then, and anyway the poor child—she was only eighteen—was paralysed by a fall from her horse and could move nothing but her hands. The parents were

crassly stupid. They thought the exertion of writing bad for her—over-exciting. Indeed, I gathered they had always been against it—thought it all nonsense; probably considered it ‘unladylike.’ Also I believe they associated her poetry writing with what used to be called an ‘undesirable attachment.’ Anyway they wouldn’t let her have any writing materials in her room. It was infernally cruel—such an agony of unfulfillment! But by the time I knew, it was too late. It was only on the last but one time I saw her (till then her mother had never left us alone) that she told me. She implored me to leave her a pencil and some paper and of course I did. Next time I came she thrust a sheet of paper with a poem on it into my hand and beseeched me to send it to the boy she was not allowed to see, but she forgot to give me his address; so I never could send it. She died that night.”

“Have you got the poem?”

“Alas, it was burnt when my house caught fire only a fortnight later. . . . I’m very sorry. Of course I’m no judge, but it always seemed to me a thing of very great beauty.”

“Can’t you remember any of it?” I clamoured.

For a moment he looked his age and very very tired. “I’m sorry I can’t,” he said, with a shrug.

“What did she look like?”

He cleared his throat.

“The loveliest sprite I ever saw. A slip of the new moon. Very fair, shining hair; tiny pale, flickering face, dark, wondering—marvelling eyes. And her hands! . . . I was little more than a boy, but I have never forgotten the sense of a rare, rare—

indeed an utterly unique being, and of an, alas! frustrated yet undefeatable spirit—an intensity of purpose—”

“Oh, Dr. Lane, can’t you even tell me what the poem was about?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I should only spoil it if I tried. It was haunting—extraordinarily haunting, but infinitely subtle and elusive. As a matter of fact, I never could quite see why it was called *The White Moth*.”

The Corner Shop

PETER WOOD'S executors found their task a very easy one. He had left his affairs in perfect order. The only surprise yielded by his methodical writing-table was a sealed envelope on which was written, "Not wishing to be bothered by well-meaning Research Societies, I have never shown the enclosed to anyone, but after my death all are welcome to read what, to the best of my knowledge, is a true story."

The manuscript bears a date three years previous to the death of the writer, and is as follows:

I have long wished to record an experience of my youth. I won't attempt any diagnosis. I draw no conclusions. I merely narrate certain events.

One foggy evening, after a day of enforced idleness in my chambers (I had just been called to the Bar) I was rather dejectedly walking back to my lodgings, when my attention was drawn to the brightly-lit window of a shop. Seeing the word

"Antiques" on its sign-board, and remembering that I owed a wedding present to a lover of bric-a-brac, I grasped the handle of the green door. Opening with one of those cheerful tinkling bells, it admitted me into large rambling premises thickly crowded with all the traditional litter of a curiosity shop. Pieces of armour, warming-pans, cracked and misted mirrors, church vestments, spinning-wheels, brass kettles, chandeliers, gongs, chess-men, and furniture of every size and every period. But in spite of all the clutter there was none of the dusty gloom one associates with such collections. Far from being dingy, the room was brightly lit and a crackling fire leapt up the chimney. In fact, so warm and cheerful was the atmosphere that after the cold, dark fog outside it struck me as most agreeable.

At my entrance, a young woman and a child—by their resemblance, obviously sisters—rose from arm-chairs. Bright, bustling, gaily dressed, they were curiously unlike the type of person who usually presides over such wares. A flower or a cake-shop would have seemed a far more appropriate setting. Inwardly awarding them high marks for keeping the place so clean, I wished them good-evening. Their smiling faces and easy manners made a very pleasant impression on me, but, though the elder sister was most obliging in showing me all around the treasures and displayed considerable knowledge as well as appreciation, she seemed wholly indifferent as to whether or not I made any purchase.

Finding a small piece of Sheffield plate very moderately priced, I decided it was the very present for my friend. Explaining that I was without sufficient cash, I asked the elder sister if she would take a cheque.

"Certainly," she answered, briskly producing pen and ink. "Will you please make it out to the 'Corner Curio Shop?' "

It was with conscious reluctance that I left the cheerful precincts and plunged back into the saffron fog.

"Good evening, sir. Always pleased to see you at any time," rang out the elder sister's pleasant voice, a voice so engaging that I left almost with a sense of having made a friend.

I suppose it must have been a week later that, as I walked home one bitter cold evening, fine powdery snow brushing against my face and a cutting wind lashing down the streets, I remembered the welcoming warmth of the cheerful Corner Curio Shop, and decided to revisit it. I found myself to be in the very street, and there, yes, there was the very corner. It was with a sense of disappointment, out of all proportion to the event, that I found the shop wearing that baffling, shut-eyed appearance, and read the uncompromising word *closed*.

An icy gust of wind whistled round the corner; my wet trousers flapped dismally against my chapped ankles. I longed for the warmth and glow within, and felt annoyingly thwarted. Rather childish, for I was certain the door was locked, I grasped the handle and shook it. To my surprise it turned in my hand, but not in answer to its pressure. The door was pushed open from the inside, and I found myself peering into the dimly lit countenance of a very old, frail-looking little man.

"Please do come in, sir," said a gentle, rather tremulous voice, and feeble footsteps shuffled away in front of me.

It is impossible to describe the altered aspect of the place. I assumed the electric light had fused, for the darkness of the large room was thinned only by two guttering candles, and in

the dim wavering light the dark shapes of furniture, formerly brightly lit, now loomed towering and mysterious, casting weird, almost menacing shadows. The fire was out. Only one faintly glowing ember told that any had lately been alive. Other evidence there was none, for the grim cold of the atmosphere was such as I had never experienced. The phrase "it struck chill" is laughingly inadequate. In retrospect the street seemed almost agreeable. In its biting cold there had at least been something exhilarating. One way and another the atmosphere of the shop was now as gloomy as previously it had been cheerful. I felt a strong impulse to leave at once, but the surrounding darkness thinned, and I saw the old man busily lighting candles here and there.

"Anything I can show you, sir?" he quavered, approaching with a taper in his hand. I now saw him comparatively distinctly, and his appearance made an indescribable impression on me. As I stared, Rembrandt flitted through my mind. Who else could have given any idea of the weird shadows on that ravaged face? *Tired* is a word we lightly use. Never before had I known what the word might mean. Such ineffable, patient weariness! Deep sunk in the withered face were eyes that seemed as extinct as the fire. And the wan frailty of the small bent frame!

The words "dust and ashes, dust and ashes," strayed through my brain.

On my first visit, you may remember that I had been surprised by the uncharacteristic cleanliness of the place. The queer fancy now struck me that this old man was like an accumulation of all the dust one might have expected to find distributed over such precincts. In truth, he looked scarcely more solid than a

mere conglomeration of dust and cobwebs that might be dispersed at a breath or a touch.

What a fantastic old creature to be employed by those well-to-do looking girls! He must, I thought, be some old retainer kept on out of charity.

"Anything I can show you, sir?" repeated the old man. His voice had little more body than the tearing of a cobweb, and yet there was a curious, almost pleading, insistence in it, and his eyes were fixed on me in a wan yet devouring stare. I wanted to leave. Definitely I wanted to go. The mere proximity of the poor old man distressed me. I felt wretchedly dispirited, but, involuntarily murmuring, "Thank you, I'll look round," I found myself following his frail form, and absentmindedly inspecting various objects temporarily lit up by his trembling taper.

The chill silence broken only by the tired shuffle of his carpet slippers got on my nerves. "Very cold night," I hazarded.

"Cold, is it? Cold, cold, yes, I dare say." In his grey voice was the apathy of extreme inanition.

For how many years, I wondered, had he been "incapable of his own distress"?

"Been at this job long?" I asked, dully peering at an old four-poster bed.

"A long, long time." The answer came softly as a sigh, and as he spoke time seemed no longer a matter of days, weeks, months, years, but a weariness that stretched immeasurably. Suddenly I began to resent the old man's exhaustion and melancholy, the infection of which so unaccountably weighed down my own spirits.

"How long, O Lord, how long?" I said as jauntily as I could manage, adding, with odious jocularity, "Old age pension about due, what?"

No response.

In silence he moved over to the other side of the room.

"Quaint piece, this," said my guide, picking up a little grotesque frog that lay on a shelf amongst various other odds and ends. It seemed to be made of some substance similar to jade—soapstone I guessed—and, rather struck by its oddity, I took it from the old man's hand. It was strangely cold.

"Rather fun," I said. "How much?"

"Half a crown, sir," whispered the old man, glancing up at my face. Again his voice was scarcely more audible than the slithering of dust, but there was a strange gleam in his eyes. Eagerness? Could it be?

"Is that all? I'll have it," said I. "Don't bother to pack up old Anthony Roland. I'll put him in my pocket."

As I gave the old man half a crown, I inadvertently touched his hand. I could scarcely suppress a start. I have said the frog struck cold, but, compared to that desiccated skin, its substance was tepid. I can't describe the chill of that second's contact. Poor old fellow! I thought, he's not fit to be about in this lonely place. I wonder those kind-looking girls allow such an old wreck to struggle on. "Good-night," I said.

"Good-night, sir. Thank you, sir," quavered the feeble old voice. He closed the door behind me.

Turning my head as I breasted the driving snow, I saw his form, scarcely more solid than a shadow, dimly outlined against

the candlelight. His face was pressed against the big glass pane. And, as I walked away, I pictured his exhausted, patient eyes peering after me.

Somehow I was unable to dismiss the thought of that ancient man. Long, long after I was in bed and courting sleep I saw his ravaged face, with its maze of wrinkles, and the great eyes like lifeless planets, staring, staring at me, and in their steady stare there seemed something that beseeched. Yes, I was unaccountably perturbed by his personality, and even after I achieved sleep, my dreams were full of him.

Haunted, I suppose, by a sense of his infinite tiredness, in my dreams I tried to force him to rest—to compel him to lie down. But no sooner did I succeed in laying out his frail form on the four-poster bed I'd noticed in the shop (only now it seemed more like a grave than a bed, and the brocade coverlet had turned into sods of turf)—than he would slip from my grasp and tottering resume his rambles round and round the shop. On and on I chased him, down endless avenues of weird furniture, but still he eluded me, and now the dim shop seemed to stretch on and on unendingly, to merge into an infinity of sunless, airless space until at length, exhausted and breathless, I myself collapsed and sank into the four-poster grave.

The very next morning an urgent summons took me out of London, and in the anxiety of the ensuing week the episode of the Corner Curio Shop was banished from my mind. As soon as my mother was pronounced out of danger, I returned to my dreary lodgings. Dejectedly engaged in adding up my wretched accounts and wondering where on earth to try to find the money

to pay next quarter's rent, I was agreeably surprised by a visit from an old school-fellow, at that time practically the only friend I had in London. He was employed by one of the best-known firms of fine art-dealers and auctioneers.

After a minute's conversation, he got up in search of a light. My back was turned to him. I heard the sharp scratch of a match, followed by propitiating noises to his pipe. Suddenly these were broken off by an exclamation.

"Good God, man!" he shouted. "Where did you get this?"

Turning round, I saw he had snatched up my purchase of the other night, the absurd little frog, whose presence on my mantelpiece I had practically forgotten.

Closely scrutinising it through a small magnifying glass, he held it under the gas-jet and his hands shook with excitement.

"Where did you get this?" he repeated. "Have you any idea what it is?"

Briefly I told him that, rather than leave a shop empty handed, I had bought the frog for half a crown.

"Half a crown?" he echoed. "My dear fellow, I can't swear to it, but I believe you've had one of those amazing pieces of luck one hears about. Unless I'm very much mistaken, this is a piece of jade of the Hsia Dynasty. If so, it is practically unique."

To my ignorance these words conveyed little. "Do you mean it's worth money?"

"Worth money? Phew!" he ejaculated. "Look here. Will you leave this business to me? Let me have the thing for my firm to do the best they can by you. I shall be able to get it into Thursday's sale."

Knowing I could implicitly trust my friend, I agreed to his

proposal. Reverently wrapping the frog up in cotton-wool, he hurried off.

Friday morning I had the shock of my life. Shock does not necessarily imply bad news, and I assure you that for some seconds after opening the one envelope lying on my dingy breakfast-tray, the room spun round and round. The envelope contained an invoice from Messrs. Spunk, fine art dealers and auctioneers:

"To sale of Hsia jade, £2,000, less
10 per cent. commission . . . £1,800,"

and there, neatly folded, made out to Peter Wood, Esq., was Messrs. Spunk's cheque for £1,800. For some time I was completely bewildered. My friend's words had raised hopes; hopes that my chance purchase would facilitate the payment of next quarter's rent—possibly might even provide for a whole year's rent; but that so large a sum was involved had never even crossed my mind. Could it be true, or was it some hideous joke? Surely it was, in the trite phrase, much, much too good to be true! It wasn't the sort of thing that happened to oneself. Still feeling physically dizzy, I rang up my friend. The normality of his voice and the heartiness of his congratulations convinced me of the truth of my astounding fortune. It was neither joke nor dream. I, Peter Wood, whose bank account was at present £20 overdrawn, and who—except for shares amounting to £150—possessed no securities whatever, now, by a sheer fluke, held in my hand a piece of paper convertible into 1,800 golden sovereigns! I sat down to think—to try to realize—to readjust. From a jumble of plans, problems, and emotions, one fact emerged

crystal clear. Obviously, I could not take advantage of that nice girl's ignorance or of her poor old caretaker's incompetence, whichever was to blame. No, I couldn't accept this amazing gift from fate, merely because, by a sheer fluke, I had bought a treasure for half a crown.

Clearly I must return at least half the sum to my unconscious benefactors. Otherwise I should feel I had robbed them almost as much as if, like a thief in the night, I had broken into their shop. I remembered their pleasant, open countenances. What fun to astonish them with my wonderful news! I felt a strong impulse to rush to the shop but, for once having a case in court, was obliged to go to the Temple. Endorsing Messrs. Spunk's cheque, I addressed it to my bankers, and wrote one of my own for £900 made out to the Corner Curio Shop.

This I put in my pocket, determined to call on my way home.

It was late before I was free to leave the Law Courts and, on arriving at the shop, though disappointed, I was not surprised to see the notice *closed*. Even supposing the old caretaker to be on duty, there was no particular point in seeing him. My business was with his mistress. So, deciding to postpone my visit to the following day, I was on the point of hurrying home when, just as if I were expected, the door opened, and there on the threshold stood the old man peering out into the darkness.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?"

His voice was even queerer than before. I now realized that I had dreaded re-encountering him, but I found myself irresistibly compelled to enter. The atmosphere was as grimly cold as on my last visit. I felt myself actually shiver. Several candles, obviously only just lit, were burning, and by their glimmer I

saw the old man's questioning gaze intently fixed on me. What a face! I had not exaggerated its weirdness. Never had I seen one so singular, so striking. No wonder I had dreamt of him. How I wished he hadn't opened the door!

"Anything I can show you tonight, sir?" His voice trembled.

"No, thanks. I have come about that thing you sold me the other day. I find it's of great value. Please tell your mistress that I will pay her a proper price for it tomorrow."

As I spoke there spread over the old man's face the most wonderful smile. I use *smile* for lack of a better word, but how convey any idea of the beauty of the indefinable expression that transfigured the time-worn face? Tender triumph—gentle joy—rapturous reverence. What mystery did I witness? It was like frost yielding to sunshine, the thawing of some thickly frozen grief in the dawn-radiance of some unsurmisable redemption. For the first time in my life I had some inkling of the word "beatitude."

It was impossible to describe the impression made on me by that radiant face. The moment, as it were, brimmed over. Time ceased, and I became conscious of infinite things. The silence of the shop was now broken by the gathering-itself-together sound of an old clock about to break into speech. I turned my head towards one of those wonderful, intricate pieces of medieval workmanship—a Nuremburg grandfather clock. From a recess beneath its exquisitely painted face, quaint figures emerged, and while one struck a bell, others demurely stepped through the mazes of a minuet. My attention was rivetted by the pretty spectacle, and not till the last sounds had trembled into silence did I turn my head.

I found myself alone.

The old man had vanished. Surprised at his leaving me, I looked all around the large room. Oddly enough, the fire, which I had supposed dead, had flared into unexpected life, and now cast a cheerful glow. But neither fire nor candlelight showed any trace of the old caretaker.

"Hullo? Hullo?" I called interrogatively.

No answer. No sound, but the loud ticking of clocks and the crackle of the fire. I walked all around the big room. I even looked into the great four-poster bed of my dreams. I then saw that there was a smaller adjoining room, and, snatching up a candle, hastened to explore it. At the far end I discovered a tiny winding staircase leading up to a little gallery that surrounded the room. The old man must have withdrawn into some upstairs lair. I would follow him. I groped my way to the foot of the stairs, and began to go up, but the steps creaked under my feet, I had a feeling of crumbling woodwork, there was an icy draught, my candle went out; cobwebs brushed against my face. To continue was most uninviting. I desisted.

After all, what did it matter? Let the old man hide himself. I had given my message. Best be gone. But the main room to which I had returned was now quite warm and cheerful. How could I ever have thought it sinister? It was with a distinct sense of regret that I left the shop. I felt balked—I wanted to see that radiant face again. Strange old man! How could I ever have fancied that I feared him?

The next Saturday I was free to go straight to the shop. On the way my mind was agreeably occupied anticipating the

welcome the grateful sisters were sure to give me. As the tinkle of the bell announced my opening of the door, the two girls, who were busily dusting their goods, turned to see who came at so unusually early an hour. Recognising me, to my surprise, they bowed amiably but quite casually, as though to a mere acquaintance.

With the fairy-tale bond between us, I had expected a very different sort of greeting. I at once guessed that they had not yet heard the news, and when I said "I've brought the cheque!" I saw I was right. They looked quite blank.

"Cheque?"

"For the frog I bought the other day."

"Frog? What frog? I only remember you buying a piece of Sheffield plate."

So they knew nothing, not even of my second visit to their shop! By degrees I told them the whole story. They were overcome with astonishment. The elder sister seemed quite dazed.

"But I can't understand it! I can't understand it!" she repeated. "Holmes—that's the name of our caretaker—isn't even supposed to admit anyone in our absence—far less to sell things. He merely comes to take charge on the evenings we leave early, and is only supposed to stay till the night policeman comes on duty. I can't believe he let you in and never told us he'd sold you something. It's too extraordinary! What time was it?"

"Round about six, I should think," I answered.

"He generally leaves about half-past five," said the girl. But I suppose the policeman must have been late."

"It was later when I came yesterday."

"Did you come again?" she asked.

Briefly I told her of my visit and the message left with the caretaker.

"What an unaccountable thing!" she exclaimed. "I can't begin to understand it; but we shall soon hear his explanation. I expect him in any moment now. He comes in every morning to sweep the floors."

At the prospect of meeting the remarkable old man again I felt a thrill of excitement. How would he look in the daylight? Would he smile again?

"Very old, isn't he?" I hazarded.

"Old? Yes, I suppose he is getting on; but it's a very easy job. He's a good, honest fellow. I can't understand his doing anything on the sly. I'm afraid we've been rather slack in our cataloguing lately. I wonder if he sells odds and ends for himself? Oh no, I can't bear to think it! By the way, can you remember whereabouts this frog was?"

I pointed to the shelf from which the caretaker had produced the piece of jade.

"Oh, from that pile? An odd lot I bought the other day for next to nothing. I haven't sorted or priced yet. I can't remember any frog. Oh, what an incredible thing to happen!"

At this moment the telephone rang. She raised the receiver.

"Hullo? Hullo? Yes, Miss Wilton speaking. Yes, Mrs. Holmes, what do you want?" A few seconds' startled pause, and then "Dead? *Dead?* But how? Why? Oh, I *am* sorry!"

After a few more words she replaced the receiver and turned to us, her eyes full of tears.

"Fancy," she said. "Poor old Holmes, the caretaker, is dead. When he got home yesterday evening he complained of pain,

and he died in the middle of the night. Heart failure. No one had any idea there was anything the matter with him. Oh, poor Mrs. Holmes! What will she do? We must go to her at once!"

Both girls were so upset that I thought it best to leave. The singular old man had made so haunting an impression upon me that I was deeply moved to hear of his sudden death. How strange that, except for his wife, I should have been the very last person to speak with him. No doubt pain had seized him in my very presence, and that was why he had left so abruptly and without a word. Had death already brushed against his consciousness? That lovely inexplicable smile? Was that the beginning of the peace that passes all understanding?

Next day I told Miss Wilton and her sister all the details of the fabulous sale of the frog, and presented my cheque. Here I met with unexpected opposition. The sisters showed great unwillingness to accept the money. It was, they said, all mine, and they had no need of it.

"You see," explained Miss Wilton, "My father had a flair for this business amounting to a sort of genius, and made quite a large fortune. When he became too old to carry on the shop, we kept it open partly out of sentiment and partly for the sake of occupation. But we don't need to make any profit."

At last I prevailed upon them to accept the money, if only to spend it on the various charities in which they were interested. It was a relief to my mind when the matter was settled.

The strange coincidence of the frog proved a bond between us, and in the course of our amicable arguments we became very friendly. I got into the way of dropping in quite often, and

soon began quite to rely on their sympathetic companionship. I never forgot the impression made on me by the old man, and often questioned the sisters about their poor caretaker, but they had nothing of any interest to tell me. They merely described him as an "old dear," who had been in their father's service for years and years. No further light was thrown on his sale of the frog. Naturally, they did not like to question his widow.

One evening, when I was having tea in the inner room with the elder sister, I picked up a photograph-album. Turning its pages, I came on a remarkably fine likeness of the old man. There before me was the strange, striking countenance; but, obviously, this photograph had been taken many years before I ever saw him. The face was fuller and had not yet acquired the infinitely wearied, fragile look I remembered. But what magnificent eyes! Certainly there was something extraordinarily impressive about the man.

"What a splendid photograph of poor old Holmes!" I said.

"Photograph of Holmes? I'd no idea there was one," she said. "Let's see."

As I handed her the open book, Bessie, the younger sister, looked in through the open door.

"I'm off to the movies now," she called out. "Father's just rung up to say he'll be round in a few minutes to have a look at that Sheraton sideboard."

"All right, Bessie, I'll be here, and very glad to have his opinion," said Miss Wilton, taking the album from my hand. There were several other photographs on the same page.

"I don't see one of old Holmes," she said.

I pointed out the photograph.

"That?" she exclaimed. "Why, that's my dear father!"

"Your father?" I gasped.

"Yes, I can't imagine two people more unlike. It must have been very dark when you saw Holmes!"

"Yes, yes; it was very dark," I said quickly to gain time to think, for I felt quite bewildered with surprise. No degree of darkness could possibly account for any such mistake. I had no moment's doubt as to the identity of the man I had taken for the caretaker with the one whose photograph I held in my hand. But what an amazing, unaccountable affair!

Her *father*? Why on earth should he have been in the shop unknown to his daughters, and for what possible motive had he concealed his sale of the frog? And when he heard of its value, why leave the girls under the impression that it was Holmes, the dead caretaker, who had sold it?

Had he been ashamed to confess his own inadvertence? Or was it possible that the girls had never told him the sequel to his sale? Did they perhaps not want him to know of their sudden acquisition? What strange family intrigue was this into which I had stumbled? But, whoever it was who had been so secretive, it was none of my business. I didn't want to give anyone away. No, I must hold my tongue.

The younger sister had announced her father's approaching arrival. Would he recognize me as his customer? If so it might be rather embarrassing.

"It's a splendid face," I said shyly.

"Isn't it?" she said with pleased eagerness. "Isn't it clever and strong? Yes, I remember when that photograph was taken. It was just before he got religion." The girl spoke as if she referred to some disastrous illness.

"Did he suddenly become very religious?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly. "Poor father! He made friends with a priest, and he became so changed. He was never the same again."

From the sort of break in the girl's voice, I guessed she thought her father's reason had been affected. Did this explain the whole affair? On the two occasions when I saw him, was he wandering in mind as well as body?

"Did his religion make him unhappy?" I ventured to ask, for I was most anxious to get more light on the strange being before I met him again.

"Yes, dreadfully." The girl's eyes were full of tears. "You see . . . it was . . ." She hesitated, and after a glance at me went on: "There's really no reason why I shouldn't tell you. I've come to look on you as a real friend. Poor father came to think he had done something very wrong. He couldn't quiet his conscience. You remember me telling you of his extraordinary flair? Well, his fortune was really founded on three marvelous strokes of business. You see he had exactly the same sort of luck you had here the other day—that's why I'm telling you. It seems such an odd coincidence."

She paused.

"Please go on," I urged.

"Well, you see, on three separate occasions he bought, for a few shillings, objects that were of immense value. Only unlike you—*he did* know what he was about. The money he realized on their sale was no surprise to him. Unlike you, he did not then see any obligation to make it up to the ignorant people who had thrown away fortunes. After all, most dealers wouldn't, would they?" she asked almost angrily. "Well, father grew richer and

richer. Years later, he met this priest, and then he seemed to go sort of—er—morbid. He came to think that our wealth was founded on what was really no better than theft. He reproached himself bitterly for having taken advantage of those three men's ignorance and allowed them to chuck away fortunes. Unfortunately, in each case he succeeded in discovering what had ultimately happened to those he called his 'victims.' Most unfortunately, all three customers had died in destitution. This discovery made him incurably miserable. Two of these men had died without leaving any children, and as no relations were found, he could not make amends.

"He traced the son of the third to America: but there he, too, had died, leaving no family. So poor father could find no means of making reparation. That was what he longed for—to make reparation. His failure preyed and preyed on him, until his poor dear mind became quite unhinged. As religion took stronger and stronger hold on him, he got a queer sort of notion into his head—a regular obsession. 'The next best thing to doing a good action,' he would say, '*is to provide someone else with the opportunity for doing one.*' To give him the cue. In our sins Christ is crucified afresh. Because I sinned against Him, I must be the cause of three correspondingly good actions to counterbalance my own bad ones. In no other way can I atone for my crimes against Christ, for crimes they were—.' In vain we argued with him, saying he had done only as nearly all other men would have done. It was no use. 'Other men must judge for themselves. I have done what I know to be wrong,' he would moan. He got more and more fixed in his idea of expiation. It became real religious mania!

"Determined to find three human beings who, by their good actions, would, as it were, *cancel* the pain caused to Divinity by what he called his 'three crimes,' he busied himself in finding insignificant-looking works of art which he would offer for a few shillings. Poor old father! Never shall I forget his joy when one day a man returned a vase he had bought for five shillings and then discovered to be worth £500, saying: 'I think you must have made a mistake'. Just as you did, bless you!

"Five years later a similar thing occurred, and he was, oh, so radiant! Two of humanity's crimes cancelled out. Two-thirds of his expiation achieved, he felt. Then followed years and years of weary disappointment. 'I shall never rest until I find the third,' was what he always used to say."

Here the girl began to cry, hiding her face behind her hands and murmuring, "If only you had come sooner!"

I heard the door-bell ring.

"How he must have suffered!" I said. "I'm so glad I had the luck to be the third. Is he satisfied now?"

Her hands dropped from her face and she stared at me.

"I'm so glad I'm going to meet him again," I said, as I heard distant footsteps.

"Meet him?" she echoed in amazement, as the footsteps approached.

"Yes, I may stay, mayn't I? I heard your sister say your father would soon be here."

"Oh, I see!" she exclaimed. "*Her* father! Bessie and I are only step-sisters. My poor father died years ago."

“God Grante That She Lye Stille”

IT was not until three weeks after I came to take up my new practice at Mosstone that I first saw her, but most of my patients had spoken of the youthful owner of the Manor House. Many shook kindly heads because Margaret Clewer was so alone in the world: “Only twenty-two, and without a single near relation!” They also expatiated on her beauty and charm, so it was with agreeable curiosity that I set out to pay my professional call at what the Mosstone villagers still called the Great House.

As I passed through the gateway I had so often admired from the outside into a wide, grey-walled court, the muffled atmosphere of the place seemed to enfold me like a cloak. Even the air seemed thicker and more still. It was as though I had stepped out of the everyday world into something rare, cloistered and self-sufficing.

Pigeons fluttered and crooned, and plumes of blue smoke rose into the golden air. Absorbing its beauty like a long, lovely draught, I gazed at the exquisite gabled house with its great mullioned windows and queer twisted chimneys around which the swallows skimmed.

It struck me then that more than any other building I had ever seen, this weathered house—the home of the Clewers—seemed to have a face, an actual countenance that one could imagine varying like that of a beautiful woman.

Time had deposited so much on those mellowed walls; yet could any building look more remote, more utterly aloof? For many centuries a deep reservoir of life, the house so deeply imbued with the past now looked withdrawn from any further participation, as though in gentle repudiation disassociating itself both from the present and the future.

My watch told me I had arrived twenty minutes before I was due. Ever since boyhood I had loved poring over old epitaphs; so I turned into the thronged churchyard that was only a few yards from the front windows of the house.

Like most village churchyards, it was very overcrowded, but the dark, red-fruited yew trees shed an air of sombre peace over the clustered graves. Most of the graves were mere uncommemorated grass mounds, but there was also a number of grey moss-covered stones, some lying flat, others slanting at all angles, and on a large number of these I found the name of Clewer engraved. Evidently many generations of my future patient's family had lived and died in this place. Most of these long-dead Clewers seemed to have been mourned by fond and verbose relations. Nothing that uncouth rhyme and shapeless

sculpture could do to preserve the memory of the departed had been omitted. The scriptures had been ransacked for consoling texts, and prose and verse not only lavishly recounted the virtues, talents and deeds of those described as "not lost but gone before," but also painstakingly struggled to express the emotions of the bereaved. Only once in all those many generations had a strange reticence descended on the Clewer family.

In the corner of the churchyard nearest to the house, directly beneath a darkly presiding yew tree, I noticed a worn flat stone. Here nothing implored the passing tribute of a sigh. There was only the bare inscription;

Here lyes the bodye of Elspeth Clewer. Born 1550—dyed 1572.

And beneath in different lettering the words:

"God grante that she lye stille."

This inscription struck me as queerly worded, so like, and yet so different from the familiar '*Requiescat in pace.*' Could those who buried the dead girl find nothing to praise? Was to associate her with peace too great a strain on their capacity for hope? Or was the rather piteous supplication, "God grant that she lye stille," a plea made more for their own sakes than for her they consigned to the grave?

Idly I wondered whether I should ever know Margaret Clewer well enough to question her about this undesignated ancestress of hers.

It was now time to turn from the dead to the living; so I moved towards the home of the Clevvers. As I approached the iron-studded door, the air was heavily sweet with the scent of magnolias. These, as well as wisteria and clematis, clustered

thickly over the front of the building, but to my fancy the great house seemed to wear them with, as it were, a shrug of indifference, as though it knew well that nothing could really enhance its own beauty. The gentle dignity of that beauty humbled me again, and it was with a sense of intrusion that I pulled the bell and heard its distant clang and the bark of an aroused dog.

I don't know what I had anticipated, but the smiling, beribboned parlourmaid who opened the door seemed incongruous.

"Dr. Stone?" she asked. "Miss Clewer is expecting you."

Obedient to her "Come this way, please," I followed through a large hall where young people were playing pingpong and noisy games of cards, the blare of a gramophone triumphing over the confusion of sounds. A heavy, baize-covered swing door soon cut us off into complete cool silence, and a short flight of shiny black oak stairs, grandly solid to the tread, led to the door of my patient's room. The brilliant evening sun streamed in and it was through a dance of dazzling motes that I first saw her.

She lay on a low wide bed drawn close up to the open window, and a golden retriever luxuriously sprawled over the flower-embroidered coverlet spread across her feet.

I cannot remember how much I took in at first sight; I know the window-shelf and the tables were then, as always, crowded with flowers and great branches cut from trees, and the bed strewn with books, writing materials and needlework.

The shock with which I saw her was not without an element of recognition. Vaguely I had always expected that one day I should see a woman far more lovely than all others, and here—her hair gleaming in the sunshine, her translucent face smiling up at me—at last I saw her! I thought I should never see any-

thing more beautiful, yet the very next time I saw her I did, for the variety of her beauty was unending. Changing as the sea changes with the sky, just as her colouring had its special response to every tone of light, so her expression varied with every shade of feeling. It was a fluid, iridescent loveliness, suggesting far more even than it asserted.

After this first sight of her, I was often to wonder how, suppose I had to reduce my impressions to the scope of words, I should describe her. What, for instance, should I write if her mouth were defined as normal? Normal—when never for two consecutive seconds was it the same! As for her eyes! I should not even have known what colour to call them. "Eyes too mysterious to be blue, too lovely to be grey," would not help. Many more than two colours met in those pools of light.

As I entered the room I was to know so well, two canaries in a large golden cage were singing loudly, and I could scarcely hear Margaret Clewer's welcoming words. In her delightful lilting, but to my professional ear, definitely nervous voice, before she began to speak of herself, she asked many questions as to the comfort of my house and my impressions of the neighbourhood. I had almost forgotten in what capacity I was there when she said:

"I've been very silly and strained my heart somehow—perhaps through over-rowing. I've got a craze for very violent exercise. Anyhow, I feel distinctly queer, and my heart seems to beat everywhere where it shouldn't be. And so," she added in her way (how well I was to know that way) of speaking parenthetically, "my friends insist on my taking medical advice, so perhaps you had better see if my heart is in the right place."

It did not take me long to discover that her heart was badly

strained. There was also a very considerable degree of anæmia, and I prescribed three weeks' rest in bed.

My verdict was received with equanimity.

"If I can neither row nor ride, I'd just as soon be laid out," she answered gaily. "I shall be quite happy with books and food and friends, and with my beautiful Sheen. Isn't he lovely?" she added, turning the retriever's golden head towards me. After paying homage, I asked if there were anyone to whom she would like me to speak about her health.

"Oh no! I haven't any relations. There is nobody to edit me. I'm quite alone."

"But there seem so many people in the house?"

"Oh yes, but they're just visitors. When I said alone, I meant independent. I couldn't bear to be literally alone."

The last words were said with a vehemence that rather surprised me. With its multitude of books, a violin and several unfinished sketches, her room seemed to tell of varied resources, and I had already diagnosed her as a person who should be very good company to herself.

As I shook hands, saying I would return the day after to-morrow, I noticed that, for all their gaiety, the bright eyes held a slightly, not exactly hurt, but shall I say troubled expression? In spite of the nervous voice, my first impression had been that here, if anywhere, was one who had not felt the touch of earthly years. This superficial impression was already qualified. Had life already bared its teeth at this enchanting being?

"I saw you peeping and botanizing among the graves," she said, as I reluctantly turned towards the door. "Are you interested in worms and graves and epitaphs?"

"Well, at any rate, I love epitaphs," I replied, "and this is a

peculiarly picturesque churchyard. You, yourself, must surely have a weakness for it, or why occupy a room so immediately overlooking it?"

"Yes, I am close, aren't I?" She laughed. "No rude forefather could turn in his grave without my hearing him. But this happens to be the room I like best. There isn't any harm in being so near, is there?"

"I can't say I consider it physically unhealthy," I answered professionally.

She smiled her swift, slanting smile. "Are you afraid of my being troubled by ghosts, Dr. Stone? Well, if it's a nervous patient you want, I'll see what I can do to oblige you; but first, please put my heart back into the right place."

I told her I would do my best.

"*Au revoir*, then," she said. "And meanwhile, I shall look out for you in the churchyard. You ought to come and see it by night. You can't think how lovely it is in the moonlight, with a great white owl swooping and brushing against the tombstones."

As I turned my back on the beautiful house, I found myself walking as though on springs. For the first time since I came to this friendless new country a fellow creature had made me aware of myself as a human being. Till then I had been merely "the new doctor." Now I returned to my own little tame house with a sense of enhanced life! There was now something to which to look forward.

I visited my new patient three times during the next week. Finding her physical condition very little improved, I decided some violet rays would be beneficial and, as I had a portable apparatus, I was able to give the treatments in her own room.

A long course involved many visits, the occasions for the most enchanting talks I have ever known. I look back on these summer weeks as the happiest of my life. Day after day I drifted on a stream of delight. She was a magical companion, to me a veritable Pentecost. Quicksilver sympathy, lightning response, dancing voice, and that flattering way of appreciatively echoing the last words one had just said. I suppose it was all these qualities that made me for the first time in my life feel so delightfully articulate. Never can there have been a more receptive and therefore stimulating mind. It was as though she understood my thoughts almost before I had decided to put them into words.

To her understanding and sympathy there seemed no limitations. Her supple mind rejected nothing, and her gaiety was like sunlit running water, frequently flinging off a gleaming spray of laughter. How, I wondered, had she found time to read so widely, so richly to store her astonishing verbal memory? Of herself she spoke very little in any autobiographical way. After weeks of talk I knew nothing of the events of her life, of her dead parents or of her friends; but from the very beginning she showed a tendency to discuss herself psychologically, to expatiate on her character, or rather, on what—to my amusement—she called her *lack* of character.

I suppose it was about six weeks after my first visit, that our conversation took a turn that for me sounded the first faint note of disquiet.

In her usual quick, rather casual voice she said, "It must be fun to be someone very definite and positive. You can't think how uncomfortable it is to have no personality."

I laughed. "Do you suggest that you have none? I know of

no one of whose personality one is more quickly and lastingly aware."

"I'm not fishing," she said with a tinge of impatience. "I don't mean that I'm too insignificant and colourless to make any impression. I know I'm quite nice to look at; I'm not stupid, and I'm responsive. I don't know how to explain, but what I mean is that there is no real essential abiding *me*. Of course, I've got plenty of facets, and your presence temporarily endows me with a certain identity—not too bad a one. Thank you for the self I meet when I'm with you." Smiling, she made a little mock bow. "But," she went on, "I don't feel any sense of being a separate entity. No, I can't find any essential core of personality—nothing that is equally there when I'm alone, with you or with other people. There's no real continuity. I'm so hopelessly fluid."

"But, if I may say so," I broke in, "it is that very fluidity of your mind that makes it such Heaven to talk to you. We discussed Keats' letters the other day. Do you remember where he writes: 'The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts—not a select party,' I think. . . ."

"No, no! I don't mean that sort of thing at all. You entirely misunderstand me!" she interrupted, and something in her face made me realize the subject was serious to her and that the characteristic lightness of her manner hid real concern.

"I'm not worrying about my qualifications as a companion," she continued. "You see the difficulty is that I can't ever talk about myself in a serious voice. I never seem to be in earnest. But my flippancy is a reflex. I should like to be able to talk to you about myself really melodramatically."

"Please do," I urged. "I'm feeling quite serious."

"I don't expect I'll be able to, but let me try," she said. "I don't want to be a bore, but I assure you it really is nightmarish—this sense of having no identity. You remember the very first time I saw you, I told you I couldn't bear to be alone?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's because to a certain extent other people do seem to hold me together—to, as it were, frame me by, I suppose, their own conceptions of me. But often when I'm quite by myself I feel like—like water released from a broken bowl—something just spilling away—to be reabsorbed back into nothingness. It's almost like a temporary dissolution—a lapsing away. Yes, lapsing is the word—lapsing back into nothingness."

"I don't think there is anything so very unusual about your sensations," I said, I fear rather pompously. "I think we all of us at times feel something very like what you describe. It's a mild sort of neurosis, and it's in the nature of every neurosis to give the sufferer a sense of singularity."

"I daresay," she said, and went on as though making up her mind to take a fence. "But then, you see, I have twice had an experience—a strangely disturbing experience, that has made those sensations I try to describe become a real obsession."

"Experiences?" I echoed. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you," she said. "Don't expect a ghost story. I should hate to raise false hopes. It will be difficult to describe these experiences, and I don't expect you'll believe me, but they're true. Anyhow, don't interrupt. Just let me Ancient-Mariner you. . . . The first time was when I was very young—scarcely grown up. Late one evening I was resting on my bed. I was very tired and consequently especially conscious of that disquiet-

ing feeling I've tried to describe—the 'no-identity' feeling. Like any other trouble, it's apt to be worse when one's over-tired. It was dark, and my window was on the ground floor. I slept downstairs then. Suddenly I had that sense we all know of being impelled to look in a certain direction. I turned and saw a dim face pressed against the window—peering in at me. I wasn't exactly frightened—only rather detachedly aware my heart was thumping. Just then the moon slipped free from a fleece of clouds, so that I could see the face quite clearly. It was my *own* face!"

"What?" I broke in.

"Yes, Doctor Stone. Of that there was no doubt. One knows one's face," she added, with a faint smile. "Yes, my own face was gazing at me—very intently, very wistfully—and, as I stared, whatever it was that was outside shook its head very sadly. I hoped I was dreaming. I shut my eyes, but I couldn't keep them shut, and when I looked up again it was still there.

"As I have said, it was my own face I saw through the window, but did I—*could* I—look so miserable? I wanted to see myself, my own self; so I got out of bed. I found my knees were trembling and, as I went up to my looking-glass, I swayed.

"I don't know how to make you believe what I must tell you now. Don't laugh, but I know you won't do that. It was the most awful shock. I found I couldn't see myself in the glass. I stared, and stared. I shook the glass. But my reflection wasn't in it. The pictures on the wall, the corner of the cupboard, the birdcage, all the familiar objects were reflected just as usual, but I myself *was not there!*

"What I had seen was still outside, and now it looked as

though it were trying to get in—into my room, but couldn't. Terror came over me, and a feeling of faintness against which I struggled. Dizzily, I left my room, dragged myself upstairs and tottered to the Chippendale mirror in the drawing-room. The wide shining sheet of glass was hopelessly empty of what I sought. What had happened to me that I had no reflection? Surely the whole thing must be a delusion? Was I insane? I can't describe the state in which I returned to my own room. I scarcely dared open the door. To my infinite relief the face was no longer at the window. I strode to the looking-glass. My reflection was there! Except that I looked strangely wan, my face was as usual."

She paused.

"That was the first time it happened. Shall I tell you about the second, or do you propose to certify me at once?"

"Go on," I said sternly.

"It was about three years later. I was laid up with a sprained ankle. I had been in a sort of apathy all day and towards evening was overtaken by that distressing sense of lack of identity I've tried to describe. There seemed no string threading the beads of mere moods. I felt without any single real opinion, emotion or impulse. It was like being an actress pushed on to a stage without knowing a single word of my part. Just a sense of complete vacuum. At the time neither my mind nor my hands were engaged. I was not even consciously looking in any particular direction. Suddenly I found myself rigid and staring. There was a sofa in my room, and on it lay a form, lying just as I lay on my bed. The form was like my own, and again my own face gazed at me—oh! so mournfully. As before, that awful sense of

faintness—of ebbing away—came over me, but I just managed to remain conscious. The form still lay on the sofa. The face gazed at me with an unforgettable look of despair. It looked as though it wanted to speak—in fact, the lips moved—but I heard no words. A hand-mirror lay on a table within my reach, and I forced myself to lift it up to my eyes. My dread was realized. I stared into blankness. My face was not reflected. For some time I lay there, now staring spellbound at what lay on the sofa, now searching the empty mirror. I don't know how long it was before mistily, gradually, my reflection began to reappear, flickering in and out until at last it was still and, except that I looked almost as exhausted as I felt, quite normal. . . . Of course, I didn't say anything about this to anyone. You are the first person I have ever told. What is your verdict?"

"I am going to say a very tiresome thing," I replied, with a dreary sense of the futility of my words as I pronounced them. "I think you dreamt both experiences."

"If you are going to talk like that," she said wearily, "I shall never tell you anything about myself again. You know just as well as I do that I was awake."

"Well," I said, "you may not have been actually physically asleep, but I think this com—"

"If you use the word 'complex' I shall change my doctor!" she interrupted laughingly.

"I think," I continued, "that you allowed this—shall we call it obsession?—about your lack of any continuity of identity to weigh so heavily on your subconscious mind that it created a sort of symbolic imagery which imposed itself on your senses even to the point of definite illusion. It was, so to speak, a fixation of a metaphor—if I may put it that way. This sort of

phenomenon is quite well known to psychologists. I could give you several examples."

Margaret shook her head sadly. "It's sweet of you to try to reassure me, but I'm afraid I'm not convinced. And," she added with darkening eyes, "the matter really troubles me for more than I've been able to convey. I think I told you I felt faint both times? Somehow I knew it was dreadfully important that I should not actually faint. With a desperate effort I clung to consciousness. I simply didn't dare let myself go and . . . and quite slip my moorings. It would be awful to be ousted, wouldn't it?"

"Ousted?" I echoed blankly.

"Well, isn't it rather a risk to leave untenanted bodies lying about? Houses need caretakers."

She laughed, but there was no laughter in her eyes.

Before I left, she had dismissed the subject and become her usual radiant self, and yet never again was I to feel quite untroubled about her.

As for her "experiences," I dismissed them as purely subjective. Anything they might intimate was still for me too far removed in the regions of sheer fantasy. It was something in her voice, when she used the word "ousted," that had made me conscious of a chill. That and the expression in her eyes.

As always, I turned back to gaze at the house as I went out of the gate. The golden glow of the fading day warmed its grey austerity, and this evening, I fancied that it wore an expression positively benign and sheltering.

I did not see much less of my patient after she ceased to be an invalid. Not only did I still give her electric treatment, but

she would often ask me to dinner, and the happiest hours of my life were spent in her little sitting-room, the most intensely personal room I have ever known. It was like her very shell.

I look back on those magic evenings of that late summer and see them through a golden haze. The white panelled room heavy with the scent of flowers; the golden retriever, his plumed tail sweeping from side to side; Margaret in her shimmering beauty; the two of us talking—talking—talking; Margaret reading aloud, or at her piano (always playing by heart), gliding from one loveliness into another, and characteristically never saying what it was that she was about to play.

She frequently reverted to what she had told me on that day of sudden confidence, but usually very lightly, as though the matter no longer preyed on her mind. Once she even laughingly referred to herself as the "Absentee Landlady." Indeed, from the lulled expression of her eyes, I judged her nerves to be much quieter, and it was a shock to me to realize how easily I had been deceived by the lightness of her manner. One evening she broke off in the middle of a poem she was reading aloud, and said, "I feel very detached from myself this evening—disquietingly detached."

Then she began to harp on the old theme, dwelling on the affair of her reflection—the "home-made symbol," as we had agreed to call it. Her voice was unconcerned, and in an attempt at reassurance I said something rather perfunctory.

At that she suddenly burst out with startling vehemence: "From every word you say, I know that you don't understand, and that I can never make you understand!"

My distress at having failed her must have shown in my face.

"So sorry," she said in her sweetest manner. "How can you be expected to guess I'm serious when I can't help speaking even of these things in my small-talk voice? I am such an involuntary bluffer! But now, for heaven's sake, don't let's say another word about Margaret Clewer! Please read to me. I want to get on with my embroidery."

I look back on that evening as the end of a halcyon spell. The next morning stands out sharply etched on my memory. From then onwards it was through a web of mystification, gradually thickening into almost unbearable horror, that I struggled to keep my reason.

I had just finished breakfast when I was told Miss Clewer's maid wished to speak to me on the telephone. I knew Rebecca Park well. She worshipped her mistress, whom she had attended since childhood, and I was sure that, with the instinct of the simple and devoted, she recognized in me a real friend. Her voice was sharp with anxiety.

"Please come quick, sir. I can't wake my mistress this morning, and her sleep doesn't seem natural."

Ten minutes later I entered the familiar bedroom. Margaret lay in something between a swoon and a sleep. She breathed unevenly and her hands were tightly clenched.

Something clutched at my heart as I looked at Margaret's unconscious face. I can't remember whether I had ever actually pictured her asleep. If so, I could never have surmised what I now saw. How could closed eyes and lack of colour effect so great if subtle a change in a familiar face? What was it in the expression of those lovely features that was so utterly alien—so damnably alien—to the Margaret I loved?

Struck by the coldness of her wrist when I felt her pulse, I told Rebecca to fetch a hot-water bottle, and as we turned back the bedclothes to apply it we both received a shock. Margaret's feet were not only ice-cold, but damp and stained with earth and little lumps of clay soil stuck between the toes. It had been a very wet night.

"She's been walking in her sleep," I whispered to Rebecca. "On no account tell her, and please wash all traces from her feet. Quick, before she wakes."

As I bathed her blue-veined temples, Margaret gave a long, shuddering sigh, and breathed out, "No! No! No!" Indescribably piteous, her voice rose as she pleaded.

As she recovered consciousness and the long raying lashes lifted, her own natural expression swam into her eyes like some beautiful flower rising to the surface through muddied waters. Her first words, however, were strange, and at the time I wondered whether Rebecca noticed.

"Is it me?" she said, gazing upwards.

Not, as I might have expected—for my presence must have puzzled her—"Is it you?" but "Is it *me*?"

I explained my presence, telling her as unconcernedly as possible that I had been sent for because she had fainted.

Her brow contracted and fear looked out of her eyes. As soon as Rebecca had left the room she spoke in the quick level voice that I associated with her rare confidences.

"It happened again last night."

"What happened?"

"I got pushed out of myself, no reflection to be seen in the glass—nothing. You know I told you before how desperately

hard whatever was left of myself had to struggle not to faint. Well, this time I did faint. The awful dizziness overcame me. Yes, I had to let go." She gave a queer little laugh. "Yes, this time I really slipped my moorings and evidently my faint—as you call it—lasted an unconscionable time. Not that I know when it was I went off. 'Went off' is the correct expression, isn't it?"

Impressing on Rebecca the necessity for absolute quiet, I started on my professional rounds, but not for one moment in all that busy day did the thought of Margaret leave my mind. An undefined but deep anxiety settled in my heart.

I have already admitted that I loved her. It did not occur to me that I could lay any claim to so transcendent a being. As soon would I have made a declaration to the moon. Fool that I was! How often have I asked myself whether avowed love might have helped where friendship failed.

At about half-past twelve that night I suddenly awoke; thoughts of Margaret thrumming in my brain. Suppose she were to walk in her sleep again? She might injure herself or wake up and be terrified. How could I have risked such a thing happening again without even warning her? Of course I should have arranged for someone to sleep in her room.

Almost before I knew I had decided to go to the Manor House I was already in my clothes. If I found her sleep-walking, I could lead her home without waking her.

A full moon flooded the house with a strange green beauty. Glancing at Margaret's window, I was surprised to see it shut on so warm a night. I decided to patrol the courtyard and watch the door in case she should emerge. I trod as softly as

possible. Save for the distant bark of the inevitable dog, my vigil seemed unshared. The night seemed full of an indescribable menace. A low wind crept through the trees and the leaves whispered momentarily. Claimed by the moon, the house looked wan and remote, palely repudiating any human allegiance it might seem to concede by daylight.

I was startled by the loud hoot of an owl, a sound I can never hear without a strange stirring as of some forgotten but haunting memory. "You can't think how lovely it looks at night with a great white owl sweeping about." I remembered Margaret's words, and obeyed an impulse to enter the churchyard. As he passed on his blundering flight, a white owl almost brushed my cheek.

Beneath the transmuting moon the crowded tombstones looked more sharply outlined than by daylight—far less merged into the green quiet of the long grass. In the daytime the atmosphere breathed a sense of acquiescence as though the oft-repeated text, "Thy will be done," had been instilled into the very air, but now the peace of buried centuries seemed challenged, the consecrated ground to quiver with insubmission. Even the yew trees appeared to bristle. Starkly black, they stood like mutinous sentinels.

As I turned my eyes to the eastern side of the churchyard, I heard my own gasp. In the uttermost corner something white glimmered on the ground. I knew at once what it was. Ten strides brought me to where Margaret in her long nightgown lay outstretched across a flat tombstone. Her arms, the hands tightly clenched, were flung out in front of her head; her slim, protesting body writhed. It looked as though she were straining

to rise, but had no power—almost as though some force held her down. I heard a low, piteous moan and knelt to examine her pale, twisted face. The eyes were shut. Her tormented body rolled over to one side, leaving the inscription on the grey lichened stone exposed. As I knelt I involuntarily read the brief words:

*Here lyes the body of Elspeth Clewer.
"God grante that she lye stille."*

I remembered my first visit to the churchyard. So it was upon the grave of Elspeth Clewer, the uncommended ancestress who had so aroused my curiosity, that Margaret lay!

"No! No! No!" was wrung from her writhing lips, and again her body twisted in anguish.

I raised her gently. Strength was needed. It was like drawing a body out of a quicksand. Afraid of waking her, very slowly I led her back to the house and up to her bedroom.

Sheen, the golden retriever, greeted me drowsily, but with his usual delicate courtesy, and when I had laid her on the bed, he gently licked his mistress's white hand.

I watched by her side for some time until her sleep seemed tranquil and normal. Then, in misplaced confidence, I left her alone, except for the dog who lay stretched out his golden length across the bed.

Anxious to see her the next morning, I went round as early as possible, intending to explain my uninvited visit by a wish to alter a prescription. But Rebecca met me in the passage, her honest brow furrowed with worry.

"You're a glad sight for sore eyes, Doctor. I was just going to send for you. Miss Margaret's just like she was yesterday—

deep drowned in that sleep that doesn't seem natural. I can't abide to see her like that."

"I think it only means she's very over-tired," I said, anxious to soothe.

"That's as may be," she answered, unconvinced. "Though what she's done to get so tired, I don't know. And, Doctor, there's something most dreadful been and gone and happened. I suppose that dratted cat must have got into my lady's room in the night and forced its way—the cunning brute—into the bird-cage, and there's them two sweet little birds, as Miss Margaret sets such store by, lying dead in their blood with their poor little heads torn right off of their bodies. Really, I don't know how to tell Miss Margaret when she wakes. She'll take on so!"

"I'll tell her," I said, hastily adding as I followed into the bedroom, "but, for heaven's sake, take away the cage; she mustn't see that awful sight when she wakes."

With little moans of concern the maid hurried off with her gruesome burden.

Margaret lay in deep unconsciousness. Her appearance was in every way the same as on the previous morning. I turned over her limp hand to feel her pulse. Then I heard my heart hammer in my ears. It was as though it had taken in something my mind refused to accept. Soon I felt deadly sick. Self-preservation, reason, fought against the evidence of my sight, but in vain.

The fragile white hand I had so often ached to kiss was thickly smeared with red, and sticking between the fingers and thumb was a cluster of blood-stained feathers.

For the first time I knew what it was to shudder with my

whole being. Difficult though it was to control my thoughts, prompt action was necessary, and, fetching warm water, I hastily washed all traces from her hand.

Soon afterwards she turned and, struggling back through layers of oblivion, came to herself. Bewilderment showed in her eyes, then relief and welcome.

"What's the matter?" she asked, looking up at my face. Struggling to hide the shrinking I felt, I explained my presence and wrote out a prescription.

Margaret looked round the room for her inseparable companion. "Where's Sheen?" she asked.

"He wasn't in here when I come in this morning, Miss Margaret," said Rebecca, "and I can't find him anywhere. I've asked everyone, and no one's seen him."

"He must have jumped out of the window," said Margaret. "How queer of him."

At her request I looked out of the window. The flowerbed below showed a dog's pawmarks.

"I must go and hunt for him," said Margaret. "I had a horrid dream about him."

She looked deathly pale—quite unfit to leave her bed, but I knew it would be useless to attempt to detain her. I had come to the conclusion that I must tell her of her sleep-walking and insist that for a time she should have a night nurse. I wanted an opportunity to break this to her as unalarmingly as possible, so I reminded her of her promise to call on a farmer's wife and try to persuade the obstinate woman to obey my injunctions and send her crippled child to a hospital. She agreed to come that afternoon.

As I left the house I remembered I had not told her of the death of the birds: neither had she noticed the absence of their cage.

At three o'clock we started on our two-mile walk across the fields. It was a lovely afternoon, resplendent summer, though a delicious tang in the air hinted at autumn and brought an exquisite shell-pink to Margaret's cheeks. More than ever I was struck by her astonishing look of dewy youth. Like a just opened wild rose, her face looked utterly inexperienced—as though it had never harboured any expression save one of vague expectancy. My horrid misgivings began to seem fantastically unreal.

"Have you heard of the cat's crime?" she asked. Her eyes looked like wet flowers and her voice quivered, though characteristically she tried to laugh as she added: "Of all Shakespeare's adjectives, I think the oddest are his 'harmless' and 'necessary' applied to the *cat*! I adored those little birds."

I murmured sympathy.

"I'm wretchedly worried about Sheen's disappearance, too," she said. "He's never been away from me for even an hour before. He'll go mad with misery without me. Do you think he can have been stolen?"

"I'm quite sure he hasn't," I said emphatically.

I steered the conversation until, as unconcernedly as possible, I told her I had discovered she was given to the quite common but by no means to be encouraged habit of sleep-walking.

Consternation rushed into her eyes and she flushed painfully. She tried to laugh it off.

"I wonder what my particular 'damned spot' may be. It

always is some damned spot that won't 'out' that makes people walk in their sleep—isn't it? Or may it be merely due to refractory food?"

"It's far more often caused by indigestion than by conscience," I said, with a laugh, and I took advantage of this wave of flippancy to float the hospital nurse into the conversation.

To my surprise, Margaret promptly acquiesced. In fact, it seemed to me a look of relief flickered across her face. I told her an excellent nurse was about to leave one of my patients, and I would engage her to come in that evening.

"You won't need to see her at all during the day," I said. "She'll just sit up in your room at night."

"Oh, I hope she doesn't knit," laughed Margaret. "I don't expect sleep will ever slide into my soul with her sitting there. I shall be the watched pot that never boils! However, no sleep—no walking; so it will be all to the good."

With that we dismissed the matter.

"Now let's forget everything, except the winged hour. Such a heavenly day!" she exclaimed. "Thank heaven I'm always able to live in the present. I hope you don't think it dreadful to have such a duck's-back disposition?"

She stepped out and the shadow which had overhung her ever since that unexpected outburst in her sitting-room lifted. Once more she shone out as the radiant being I had first known. It was impossible not to be infused by her gaiety, and for the time being my nightmare fears were almost dispersed. Her inimitable mimicry, delicious raillery and stream of brilliantly garbled quotations almost made me forget the unforgettable. But her radiance suddenly clouded over when I said:

"What an amazing memory you've got!"

"Memory?" she answered sharply. "Yes, I admit I have plenty of memory and understanding. But what protection are such merely *receptive* qualities?"

"Protection?" I echoed blankly.

"Well, here we are," she said in evasion, her hand on the farmyard gate. "Now I propose that you stay here, while I go in by myself and twist the good woman round my little finger. I'm sure your presence would cramp my little finger's style. Please wish it luck," and pulling off her glove she smilingly held up her tapering, pink-nailed finger. "What's the matter?" she asked uneasily.

I'm afraid an uncontrollable inward shudder must have shown on my face. The last time I had looked at that slender finger, it had been all stained with blood, and I could still see the pitiful little feathers that had stuck to it.

"I've got a stitch," I lied. "I'll wait here for your good news. Good luck."

Tormented by undismissable thoughts, I leant against the gate.

A few minutes later I heard myself hailed and was delighted to see the gardener with Sheen on a chain. As I stroked the beautiful dog's head, he slowly waved his plumed tail.

"Please, sir," explained the gardener, "the keeper found him in a coppice—a long way off, and when he brings him home, Miss Park, knowing where you was goin', she asks me to follow you, thinking Miss Clewer would be that pleased to see him safe."

Delighted to be the bearer of good news, I hurried towards the farmhouse, and was met by Margaret.

"Triumph to my little finger!" she began, but directly I spoke

of Sheen her successful mission was forgotten in delight, and she ran towards the gate. "Darling, darling Sheen! How could you leave me?" I heard her eager voice.

Then something so dreadful happened—something so painful, that even now I can scarcely bear to recall it. When, confidently expecting an exuberant welcome, Margaret approached her dog, an unaccountable change came over him. His tail was lowered until it disappeared between his cringing legs, and his whole body shook with unmistakable terror.

"Sheen—what *is* the matter?"

Her voice was piteous and, looking at her face, I saw it contorted with unbearable suffering.

"It's me!" she pleaded. "Sheen, it's me!"

But the dog she had said "would be mad with misery without her" panted, whimpered and, foaming at the mouth, cowered lower and lower as though it would creep through the ground.

"Oh, what *did* happen last night?" wailed Margaret, and put out her hands to the dog in anguished propitiation.

"Back, Miss, back!" shouted the terrified gardener.

The dog's eyes showed white, he howled, snapped wildly in Margaret's direction, and tore at his collar in frantic efforts to escape.

"Take him away!" cried Margaret. "Take him away! I'll go back by the road," and she started off as fast as her swift stride could carry her.

I overtook her, but could think of nothing to say. A terrible constraint lay between us. I looked at her. Tears coursed down her white, strained face and her mortally affronted eyes stared straight in front.

"Unaccountable things, dogs," at last I ventured.

"Unaccountable? Do you think so?" she said sharply. "I wonder." And as she strode on, she clenched her hands.

A moment later she turned to me as though she were on the point of really speaking, of revealing something tremendous. She made a little movement with one hand, but then it was as though an iron shutter slid down between us, and in a cold formal voice she told me of her successful interview with the farmer's wife. That was all we spoke of. We might have been strangers.

The next morning I went to give her some electric treatment. She looked bitterly troubled, but said she liked the hospital nurse, a pleasant, serene-faced young woman. I missed the accustomed twitter of the birds, and the room looked strangely deserted without the beautiful golden dog. I dared not ask about him, and I never saw him again.

With a pang of pity I noticed that all the mirrors had been removed.

"Has that queer thing happened again?" I ventured. "Did you think there was something wrong with your reflection?"

"Don't ask me about that any more," she answered. "I've finished with all that fanciful nonsense and I never wish to hear it alluded to again. Never, never, never!"

With that, a safety-curtain of unhappy reserve fell between us. She seemed to consign herself to the loneliness of utter withdrawal, and from that time onward the shadows settled more and more darkly on her beautiful face.

A few days after her arrival I asked the nurse to come and talk to me about her patient. She had nothing very definite to report, except that, though her charge slept for a fair number of hours, her sleep was very troubled and brought little refresh-

ment. In fact, she always seemed most tired and overwrought in the mornings.

"Of course," she said, "I do think that having no fresh air in the room these stifling hot nights may have something to do with her condition."

"Do you mean to say she doesn't have the window open in this weather?" I asked.

The stubborn summer had blazed out into a last fierce fury of heat, and I was indeed amazed.

"No, sir, I can't persuade her to have even a crack open, and sometimes I can scarcely bear the closeness myself."

I promised to use my influence.

"Then there's another thing," the nurse went on. "Do you think it can be good for anyone in an excited state of nerves to do all that rehearsing? If you'll excuse my saying so, sir, I think you should order her to give up those theatricals."

"Theatricals?" I echoed blankly. "What theatricals?"

"I don't know when they're to be, but I know she's very busy rehearsing. Whenever she sends me to fetch something during the night, and she's always asking me to fetch some book or something special from the still-room—not that she ever seems to use the things when I bring them—well, as I come back, all the way down that long passage, I hear her fairly screaming out her part. Wonderful actress she must be! You wouldn't really think it could be her own voice; no, you wouldn't think such a sweet young lady could produce so horrid a voice. It simply raises my hair—that acting voice of hers does. And, as I was saying, I really can't think it can be good for anyone whose nerves are disturbed to be studying so violent a part."

"Thank you, Nurse. I'll speak about it."

That afternoon I called on Margaret. After some casual talk I said, "I hear you sleep with your window shut, and you know you are looking extremely pale. To insist on keeping the window open all the year round may be a foolish fetish, but in this sort of weather, it really is essential."

"If the nurse makes a fuss about that, I won't keep her," Margaret burst out. "How can I leave the window open when it's from there that I feel that awful—pressure—that pressing in and—shoving—dislodging. How *can* I? Though heaven knows it's foolish enough to think it's any use to shut *things*. If stone walls cannot a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, still less can they make a fort." Suddenly she seemed to remember herself. "But these are but 'wild and whirling words'," she said smiling. "I'm so sorry. Please don't pay any attention to them. My disease of quoting grows worse and worse. It's because I haven't any opinions of my own."

She looked disquietingly excited and my own head swam. "That awful 'pressing in'?" What did she, what *could* she mean? A sense of dreadful menace almost stifled me, and I felt utterly out of touch; but something had to be said.

"When are your theatricals to be?" I asked. "I didn't know you were acting."

"Acting?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

The nurse tells me she often hears you rehearsing in the night."

She blushed crimson. "Oh, that!" she said. "Oh yes! You see I have a silly habit of reciting poetry aloud to myself and it made me feel self-conscious to know she had overheard; so I said I was rehearsing for some theatricals."

"I see," I said, but my heart sank at hearing her lie.

Then we spoke of other things, but we were both hopelessly preoccupied, and there was no life in our talk. It was almost forced, and I noticed that nearly everything Margaret said was a quotation. Scarcely anything else passed her lips the entire afternoon. I had already observed that the more tired, strained or preoccupied she seemed, the more this was the case. When her vitality was lowered it was, to use her own words, as though she had "no opinion, emotion or impulse" of her own, but was merely a thoroughfare for the thoughts of others—as though nothing remained to hold the fort except only memory.

I think it was three days later that the nurse, of her own accord, came to report to me again, and told me she considered her patient increasingly nervous and depressed. To my enquiry as to how Miss Clewer slept she answered:

"Very little now." Adding ominously, "And if you ask me, sir, I don't think she *wants* to go to sleep."

"She's given up the theatricals, hasn't she?" I asked, in as casual a voice as I could command.

"Given them up, sir? No, I wish to goodness' sakes she would! I really can scarcely bear to hear it; the way she screams out her part has thoroughly got on my nerves. As often as I come back along that passage she's going through it. I know some of her part myself. I don't believe I'll ever be able to forget the queer words."

"What are the words you overhear her saying?" I asked, in as indifferent a voice as I could contrive.

"*Saying*? You wouldn't call it that, if you heard it, sir. It's more like yelling. As I said the other day, you'd never think

such a gentle lady could produce such a terrifying voice. The words that she most often repeats are: 'Let me in! Make way! Make way! What can I do without a body? What use are you making of your body? *I want it!* You clear out! I must be lodged! I must be lodged! *I must be lodged!* And the third time she repeats 'I must be lodged! her voice rises to an absolute screech. But whatever's the matter, sir? You've come over white as a sheet!"

Murmuring that I felt faint and must get some brandy, I told her I would see her in the evening, and left the room.

My legs almost gave way as I went upstairs, and directly I reached my bedroom I turned the key in the lock, though what it was I thought might thus be debarred, God only knows. With shaking hands I opened the book I had read in bed the night before. It was a bound copy-book, filled with the faded brown of a spidery sixteenth-century writing. Margaret had long ago given me the freedom of her library, and on a high shelf I had found this manuscript—a sort of irregular journal kept by an ancestress of hers, also called Margaret Clewer. I had read it far into the night. All of it was interesting, and by the mother's final heart-broken entry I had been most vividly and painfully impressed. Were certain words quoted in it really as with horror I remembered them, or did my memory deceive my disturbed nerves?

Trembling, I turned the pages until I came to the passage:

"So she is dead! Elspeth, our shame, lyes dead. That I should live to thank God that my own child be laid in the churchyarde! A sennight yesterday since they carryed her home after her falle from her horse. A sennight of torment unimagined to us all. The passing of her eville

spirit has been a horror past believe. The drawing nigh of Death had no softening effect on her violent, eville greedy spirit. Her hold on lyfe was terrible. Breath by breath it was torne from her shattered bodye. So her fierce spirit clung to her beautiful broken bodye. God helpe us all! Could any Death be deep enough to make me to forget how with her last breaths she cryde out: 'I won't dye! I won't dye! There is still so much to do! Some way I'll get back! I must get back! My spirit is so unquenched! I *must* find another bodye. I must be lodged! I must be lodged! *I must be lodged!*'"

The long-dead woman's manuscript slipped from my hand and I struggled to think. Even last night the words of the dying changeling daughter had made me shiver. Now, after what the nurse had quoted, they seared my mind. Elspeth Clewer! I remembered the grey, uncommunicative grave beneath the yew tree. Its bleak reticence had impressed my imagination on my first visit to the churchyard, and now, to my mind's eye, it was forever associated with Margaret's prostrate, writhing body.

"God grante that she lye stille! God grante that she lye stille?" I snatched at a faint, fluttering hope. Perhaps Margaret was familiar with the journal I had found. If so, of course, its grim contents would be very likely to haunt her. Might not what the nurse mistook for a rehearsal have been her in disturbed sleep quoting that last grim passage?

That evening I found Margaret pale and wild-eyed. I told her of my discovery of the diary and asked if she had ever read it. She disclaimed all knowledge, and this time I knew she spoke the truth. I said it gave a strange account of an ancestress of hers—an Elspeth Clewer. Was it my fancy, or did she draw in her breath at the name?

"Oh! Does it?" she said. "Yes, I've heard of her. Though she

died before she was twenty-three, she's the only famous member of the Clewer family! Famous because infamous, for she crowded her short life with every imaginable vice and crime. I gather she was an absolute mythical monster of violence and cruelty: but, as I have often told you, I really don't take the faintest interest in my ancestors."

Two days later, as I sat at breakfast, the front-door bell was so violently pulled that I went to the door myself. The faithful Rebecca stood there, her face mottled with agitation.

"Oh, sir! She's been and gone and bolted!"

"Miss Clewer?" I gasped.

"No, sir," she grabbed breathlessly. "That nurse, been and gone and offed it—left my poor lamb with no word to no one. Yes, when I comes along this morning I finds my lady deep asleep, and, if you please, on the floor there's a tray with broken pieces of cup and saucer and Benger's food slopped all over the carpet. Just dropped out of nurse's hand, it must have been. And she couldn't be found nowhere; clean gone, she was—run off and left all her things behind her. Sam—that's the garden boy—he tells me he seen her tearing round the garden like as though the devil were after her. I looks in at the station and they said she'd been there a full hour before the first train went, and looked that queer without no hat nor nothing. And my lady—she looks to go to your heart this morning—she says she calls to mind asking nurse to fetch her a cup of Benger's—and then she thinks she must have fallen asleep, since she doesn't remember no more."

Furious with the nurse, I rang up the London institute from which she came and instructed them to telephone directly she

arrived. Full of foreboding, I hurried to the Manor House. I found Margaret walking up and down in the garden, her face drawn and set.

"I'm sorry I've frightened your nurse away," she said bitterly.

"Frightened her? You?" I tried to laugh.

"So it seems. A well-trained nurse who drops her tray and flies from the house must surely be a little upset."

"She must have taken leave of her senses," I said dryly. "Fortunately I know of an admirable one who happens to be free now."

"No thank you. No more nurses for me! I can't say I've found the last one very reassuring. No, I've just telegraphed to hordes of friends to come down. I've been too unsociable lately." She spoke definitely, and I know it would be useless to argue.

That afternoon I was rung up by the London matron. Nurse Newson had never turned up, but on enquiry it was found she had gone to her mother, whose telephone number I was given.

"Mrs. Newson speaking," answered a painstakingly genteel voice.

I explained who I was, stating that I wished to speak to her daughter, whose amazing behaviour demanded explanation.

The voice let itself go, and unmistakable relish of a crisis was plain through its agitation.

"Oh, sir! I'm afraid you can't speak to my daughter. She's bad in bed, and doctor says she's suffering from shock and mustn't be disturbed. Oh, sir! whatever did happen to make her take on so, such a sensible, steady girl as she is? She's in ever such a state! I never did see anyone so upset before, and I can't get out of her what it is she's so scared of—at least nothing

that you would call coherent. And, please, sir, she says she's terribly sorry to have let you down, but she couldn't have stayed on—not for any consideration.

Feeling no sympathy, I snapped, "I never heard of such behaviour! A nurse abandoning a case in the middle of the night. She must be hopelessly hysterical. What possible excuse can she have? Her patient is the most charming young lady."

"Yes, she says the young lady she was engaged for was ever so sweet, but Doctor I don't understand—she talks so wild—and when I question her, begs me not to ask, but—but wasn't there *another* young lady?"

I banged down the receiver.

It was necessary to go to the Manor House to give the address to which the nurse's luggage was to be sent. I would have gone in, but two cars were just unloading their freight of visitors. Loud voices echoed in the courtyard, and, brandishing tennis-rackets, aggressively young people bounded up the steps towards their hostess, who stood in the doorway, her face resolutely gay.

With a forlorn sense of being cut off from her, and with foreboding heavy on my heart, I stole away. As I looked back at the house, gilded by the setting sun, I almost hated it for its unconcerned beauty.

Two days later I received a note in her strangely variable, but always recognizable writing. It had no beginning:

"I am going away . . . I must leave at once. When you get this I shall be in the train. I couldn't stay here another night. Please never ask me to explain. Something unthinkable dreadful happened last night. I could never dare risk having anyone to stay here again. Not possibly.

Neither can I live here by myself.

I don't understand; but, believe me, it's fearful, and I must go. Oh, God! There *are* more things in heaven and earth!

I'll write.

Margaret Clewer."

She went abroad, and I was glad to know her gone. If life became unutterably dreary, at least my nightmare fears were in abeyance. Naturally I wrote begging for an explanation of her note, but none came. I had many letters from her; but, except for the one line, "I am glad I came away," they told me nothing. They were merely brilliant descriptions of her travels—little more than inspired *Baedekers*, with scarcely a word to show we had ever been such great friends and shared an unadmitted dread. I wrote to Rebecca to enquire after her mistress's health. Her reply said her young lady seemed well enough, but appeared restless and as though not really enjoying the full life she led.

As the leaves fluttered down till winter lay like iron over the land, the magical days of that long summer began to assume the golden haze of something dreamed. Often I would go and gaze at her empty home. I began to wonder whether I was ever to see her again. There was even a rumour that the Manor House was to be let on a long lease.

One morning, when an unusually reluctant spring had at last turned the fields to a glory of green and gold, I was surprised to see on an envelope bearing a London postmark the writing that always made my heart leap. I read:

"I find it quite impossible to keep away any longer. I feel myself irresistibly drawn home, but I shall not sleep in my old room. I shall come back Monday, but shall arrive late. Please come to luncheon Tuesday.

Margaret Clewer."

Coming home Monday? This was Monday. I should see her in little more than twenty-four hours. The day crept by with unbelievable slowness. To try and hasten tomorrow I went to bed unusually early.

In the middle of the night I woke up suddenly and with the certainty that I had been roused by some sound. Yes, there it was again, outside the house. Pebbles were being thrown up against my window. Expecting an emergency call, I struggled out of my sleepiness and looked out of the low window. The moon was full; a tall figure stood below; a white, upturned face gleamed in the silver-green light. It was Margaret! Her loveliness glimmered in the strange, cold light, but she looked wild, and there was desperate urgency in her voice.

"Quick, quick!" she cried. "I must have your help. I'm so frightened. Quick! Let me in!"

Snatching my overcoat, I hurried downstairs as quietly as I could for fear of waking my servant and opened the door.

It was no dream. The white figure stood outside, the arms outstretched towards me. A glorious hope leapt in my heart; but, as I advanced, something indescribable looked out of her eyes. With desperate haste her hands moved, and in a second her face was entirely concealed by the chiffon scarf in which she had swathed it.

"Too late! Too late!" she wailed in a changing voice. "Go back, go back, and for God's sake don't dare to follow me!" The white figure sped away.

Aghast, I started in pursuit, but after a few strides, the swathed, faceless figure turned.

At the torrent of words that were shrieked at me in an unknown voice, I stood transfixed, frozen with horror.

Wild, nauseated fear took possession of me. God forgive me, I renounced her. To save my soul I could not have followed another step. I stole back to my house and, drenched in cold sweat, lay shaking on my bed. Sleep never approached me, but I felt too shattered and ill to get up at my usual hour. At ten the telephone rang. Wondering what ghastly intimation was to come, I lifted the receiver.

Margaret's own lovely voice slid into my astonished ears.

"It's *me*. Please come and see me. They tell me I'm not well."

Her own beloved voice that I had not hoped ever to hear again! Had some monstrous dream imposed upon me? Almost I began to think it.

When I reached the Manor House, I asked where Miss Clewer's new bed-room was.

"Just the same as before, sir," replied the parlourmaid. "Miss Clewer did give orders for one to be prepared on the other side of the house, but as soon as she came she said she'd go back to her own room."

Rebecca lay in wait in the familiar passage.

"Thank God, you've come, Doctor," she whispered. "She seems to be wandering in her mind this morning."

I stole into the room. Strangely beautiful, but wan and fragile, Margaret lay back on a great pillow. She stretched out both hands in welcome. At once I knew that her memory held no trace of last night. She greeted me as though we met for the first time since her departure all those long months ago.

"Rebecca thinks I'm ill," she said. "But like Ophelia I must be 'incapable of my own distress,' because I assure you I feel quite well, and oh! so glad to see my physician!"

Did I say that, after the incident of the dog, I was only once

again to see Margaret in her incomparable radiance? Strange that it should have been now, when I was prepared to find her in delirium. But thus it was. Once more she seemed her original untroubled, sparkling self.

She questioned me about all the Mosstone news and gave irresistably funny descriptions of people met on her travels. All was as I first remembered her, dancing voice, enchanting laughter, buoyant, bubbling talk, lightning response, showers of quotations. What had Rebecca meant by describing her as delirious?

But suddenly a change came into her eyes. She clutched at my hands and held them tight. Then she began to, what Rebecca described as, wander. Her voice was solemn.

"As the tree falls, so shall it lie! That is true, isn't it, John?"

John? I had almost forgotten my unused Christian name.

"It is true in every sort of way," she went on, "isn't it, darling? And as that tree lies, so shall it be all through the days of eternity—that's true, too, isn't it, John—absolutely true?"

"Yes—yes, of course," I soothed her.

"Oh, John," she went on, "I've just found such a lovely, lovely poem. I didn't know it before. I can't think how I could have missed it. It's by Barnefield. Just listen to the mournful magic of these two lines:

" 'King Pandion, he is dead,

" 'All thy friends are lapped in lead.'

"Lapped in lead! Lapped in lead? Doesn't that make death sound delicious and luxurious? As though to be alive were something so . . . so . . . makeshift." She gave a quick laugh. "Lapped

in lead—lapped in lead," she repeated very slowly. "Oh, how lovely and peaceful and untormented! You do know that would be far the best thing that could happen to me, don't you? The best thing that could happen to *your* me. Then your me would be safe."

An urgent summons came, and I had to hurry off to a distant case. Telling Rebecca on no account to leave her mistress for a moment, and that I would get a nurse to come as soon as possible, I hurried away. It was to a birth that I had been summoned. The baby was as reluctant to enter the world as its mother seemed disposed to leave it, and midnight had already struck when I reached home. Through all the strain of that endless day I had been haunted by Margaret, and my intention was to snatch some supper and then hurry back to the Manor House. But before I had sat down the telephone rang. It was Rebecca's voice.

"Come quick, come at once! Miss Margaret seems so weak as though she couldn't scarcely breathe. I'm speaking from her room. Do—" The voice broke off. It was no longer at the mouthpiece, but I heard it cry out in deathly terror, "Oh, God, who—" And then the telephone must have been dropped.

No further sound came through. I replaced the receiver, and after a moment's pause rang up the exchange, in my impatience violently rattling the instrument. "Number, please. Number, please," expostulated the exchange. I gave the number several times, but except for shrill intermittent rings of an unanswered call there was nothing to be heard . . . I pictured the overturned telephone lying on the floor of Margaret's room.

What had happened?

Leaping into my car, I drove to the Manor House. The front door stood wide open, but no one was about. I did not meet anyone on my way to Margaret's room. The whole house seemed deserted.

What I saw when I approached the bed no one could attempt to describe and keep his reason. It writhed and moaned and seemed to breathe with terrible difficulty. I averted my eyes from the face, and with an automatic professional instinct to preserve life, administered an injection.

That which lay on the bed gave a convulsive shudder and I heard the fast, thick breathing of some desperate struggle. Determined not to see the usurper again, I kept my eyes shut. I dared not look!

Then there was silence, followed by a gentle sigh.

Something in that gentle sigh impelled me to open my eyes. Ineffable relief flowed over me. Like pure silver rising through primeval slime, the being I loved—the poor dispossessed one—had struggled through and triumphed over the awful hideousness of that spiritual invasion. It was Margaret's face that smiled at me. Sweet but hopelessly weak, her voice came.

"It's all right, Darling," she breathed, and in her tone was a tenderness I had never imagined. "It's all right. It is *I* who have won. Yes, it's me, *your* me. Don't let me give way again. Keep me safe. Hold me! Hold me!"

Sure of her haven, she gazed at me. Her hand clung to mine and her lips smiled, but the strain of that final struggle had been too much for the already weakened heart. The eyelids fluttered up once or twice as her clasp of my hand loosened. Almost inaudibly, but with an ecstasy of glimpsed peace, she breathed

out the words: "Lapped in lead—lapped in lead—" and something else I could not quite hear. I felt a last little clinging clutch at my hand, and with one or two long sighs the spirit I loved slipped from its beautiful lodging.

Some hours later I left the deserted house, and returned to the emptied world. Gratitude mingled with my grief; my broken heart was at peace, for at last I knew her to be unassailable. The long dread was at an end.

It is a desolate path I tread, but sometimes, when it seems most steep and bare, there comes, like a gentle wave washing against my tired brain, the soft assuagement of her voice murmuring, "Lapped in lead—lapped in lead." And again I hear the promise in the infinite tenderness of her whispered "Darling."

What were the words I failed to hear?

I often linger about her empty home. No smoke rises from the twisted chimneys, but pigeons still flutter and croon, and the grey house I had once thought so aloof seems to invite me into an atmosphere of benign peace.

The Playfellow

LAURA HALYARD wondered whether she would ever grow more used to the loveliness of her new home. She still felt inclined to rub her eyes whenever she looked at the dream-like house.

After the din and glare of New York, the mellow beauty and green silence of Lichen Hall lay like a spell on its new mistress. It was only a year ago that on the death of his elder brother, who had died childless, her husband Claud Halyard had succeeded to the property. Since their marriage, business had kept Claud in America; so Laura had never met her poor, paralysed brother-in-law. Yet she often thought of him, so deeply had his tragic story impressed her imagination—the early loss of his adored wife, the accident that left him a hopeless cripple and finally the ghastly tragedy of his only child, a girl of ten, who had perished in the fire that twelve years ago had destroyed one wing of Lichen Hall.

The house had been so skillfully restored that it was difficult to believe in that fatal fire—and at first its new mistress had

felt herself lapped in such an atmosphere of peace that she found it almost impossible to associate the place with anything so hideous as the death of that poor child. Could such a thing have happened here, and only twelve years ago?

Laura Halyard had all the remarkable adaptability of her country-women and, as she sat in the great hall, her slim, delicate beauty glowing in the flicker of the firelight, she looked wonderfully in tone with her setting. She was giving tea to the old vicar, whose faded eyes blinked appreciatively at the grace and beauty of his hostess. He wished he didn't feel it was time to end so agreeable a visit.

"If I may be permitted to say so, Lady Halyard," he said, reluctantly dragging his stiff limbs from the depths of the easy chair, "It is very pleasant to have a châtelaine here again. Lichen Hall has been a sad place these last twelve years."

"Yes," responded Laura. "I don't suppose my poor brother-in-law ever began to get over the terrible tragedy of that poor, poor child."

"'A broken man' is a phrase one often hears," said the parson, "but I am thankful to say that in the course of a long life it has only been my lot to know one man to whom I felt the phrase could justly be applied. That man was your brother-in-law. He did his duty by this place. No one could have done it better. But after his little Daphne's death, duty was all the world held for him. Nothing else remained. To see such grey ashes and be unable to kindle one spark was a great pain to me. Such loneliness! Scarcely anyone ever came here during those last years. Just a few old friends, but I always felt he only suffered them out of consideration for *their* feelings. . . .

Laura gave a sympathetic murmur.

"I often wondered why your husband never came, Lady Halyard," continued the old man. "In spite of the twenty years between them, they had always been such devoted brothers. It seems strange he should never once have returned to his own home until he succeeded to it."

"I know," said Laura. "My husband was very much tied by business, but still he could have managed it. I often urged a visit but he always said he thought next year would be better. I don't know why it was. Of course, Mr. Cloud, my husband's very sensitive. He shrinks from things. Perhaps—I sometimes think—he simply couldn't face his brother's misery."

"Possibly," said the vicar. "But I wish he had come. It might have made a big difference."

Laura detected a hint of reproach in the kind old voice.

"It isn't that he doesn't love this place," she assured him. "I can't tell you how much it means to him."

"I know, Lady Halyard, I know. Don't I remember him as a boy? Why, his love for his home was quite a household joke. He once gave another boy a black eye for daring to say his home was more beautiful than this! Bright days those were when he and all his sisters were young."

The old vicar's pale eyes widened as he stared wistfully into the past. "I always think this garden simply cries out for children. It's wasted when there's none about. I assure you, it's a real joy to see your little girl tearing up and down the grass terraces."

"I can't tell you how happy Hyacinth is here," exclaimed Laura. "Her day is one long rapture."

"Bless her!" said the parson. "How lovely she is and how extraordinary like—"

"Like? Like whom?"

"Like her poor cousin—like poor little Daphne. Why, surely the resemblance has struck your husband?"

"N-no. At least he hasn't said so, but then perhaps he wouldn't. Even after all these years, he can't bear to speak of his niece. He never mentions Daphne's name."

"I know it was an awful shock to him," agreed the vicar. "He was so fond of her. I remember he was always playing with her. But then, we all loved her. Yes, there was a real fascination about little Daphne."

"And was she really like our Hyacinth?"

"Like?" exclaimed the parson. "Why, it's the most astounding likeness! I assure you it gave me quite a start the first time I saw your little daughter peering at me through the bushes. Yes, it took me back twelve years. She's ten, isn't she—your Hyacinth?"

Laura nodded.

"Well, you see poor Daphne was just the same age the last time I ever saw her—the day before—yes, yes, I can see her now—the same red-gold hair framing the pale, pointed face—the wide eyes and the same eager look—something so extraordinarily *vivid*."

"Really," said Laura. Her voice trembled, and the hall swam in a blur of tears.

"Yes, a most extraordinary likeness," continued the old man. "Voices very similar, too. And your Hyacinth seems to have just the same passion for play. I never saw any being like Daphne for filling the day. She always seemed to want to cram more fun into each hour than it could possibly hold. It was almost as

though she knew she had no time to lose. Do you remember that passage in Maeterlinck about those he calls *Les Avertis*?"

"Yes, I do." Laura's voice was heavy.

"Well, well, I must be going now. Thanks, dear lady, for a very pleasant afternoon. Give my love to Daph—Hyacinth."

"Good night, Mr. Cloud. Come again soon," said Laura, rather mechanically. Turning to the fire, she kicked one of the large logs with her foot, and then stirred up the embers with the poker until they blazed into flames. She felt cold and tired. When the clergyman re-entered the room, she started. He apologised for having forgotten his gloves.

"Oh, what colour are they?" asked Laura absent-mindedly, as if a variegated assortment of gloves were likely to be lying about the hall.

"Stop one moment, Mr. Cloud," she said, when the vicar had found his gloves. "There was something I meant to ask you. How do you think my husband looks?"

"Fine, Lady Halyard, fine. He always was a magnificent fellow. Yes, I think he looks quite well. But, since you ask me, the only thing I notice about him is a sort of strained expression in his eyes, rather as though he were making some kind of mental effort—as if he were trying to remember something."

"Trying to remember something?"

"Yes. No doubt it's the result of so much work in that wretched office. I'm so glad to see him out of it. Somehow I can't picture any Halyard in an office. Oh, yes, Claud was always made for country life. Good night, Lady Halyard, good night."

Left to herself, Laura crouched over the blazing fire. "Claud made for country life?" Yes, so she had always thought. In

America he had seemed an exile pining for his native land. And yet, now that they were at his beloved home, and it had proved more beautiful than even his rhapsodies had led her to expect, what was wrong? To her growing disappointment she could not help admitting that her husband's spirits—never steady—were much lower than they used to be. A sultry gloom seemed settling on him. Then that look of strain the vicar had noticed. Others had commented on this. What could cause it, now that the present and the future seemed so fair? Business worries? wondered Laura almost hopefully. No! what business worries could he have? He told her everything. Told her everything, did he? Laura almost laughed aloud. Only today she had re-encountered that threadbare phrase. The heroine of the bad novel she was reading, a woman in total darkness concerning her husband, had confidently asserted, "He tells me everything." How could any human being ever tell anyone everything?

Without doubt Claud had something on his mind. Since their homecoming, she had been conscious of a barrier thickening between them. In old days he would, if challenged, often admit to a fit of depression. Now he seemed to resent any inquiry as to his health or spirits. If she said, "Is anything the matter?" he would answer almost angrily, "The matter? No, nothing's the matter. Don't suggest things."

Laura was not left to her reflections for long. Tall and good-looking, her husband strode into the room with their daughter Hyacinth riding on his shoulders, her red-gold mop of hair shining above his dark head.

The three of them settled around the fire. Hyacinth with her clasped knees drawn up to her pointed chin, and her wide eyes

staring into the flames, made a poor pretense of listening to her father reading *Ivanhoe* for her benefit. The moment the chapter was finished, she sprang on to the tips of her toes and stood quivering like a flame released.

"May I go now?" her whole eager being seemed to ask.

Struck afresh by the gleaming quality of her beauty, her father gazed lovingly at her. So breathlessly full of life! Ought she perhaps to have playfellows of her own age?

"Are you lonely, Sprite?" he asked tenderly.

"Lonely! Oh no! Daddie, I'm never, never lonely here! Not *here!*" There was a note of exultation in the child's happy laugh.

"I must go now!" she said, excitedly, and, slipping out of her father's arms, she darted up the dark, twining staircase and with a wave of her hand, disappeared from her parents' gaze. Long after she had turned the corner that took her out of sight, they could still hear her quick light step and her voice trilling out "Come Lasses and Lads, Take Leave of your Dads."

"How Hyacinth's voice matches her face, doesn't it, Claud?" said Laura. "Not many people's do. Hers has that piercing quality of crystal youth. It's like cold, cold water or the feel of biting into an apple."

Claud rose to throw another log on to the blazing fire.

"Laura, what does Hyacinth mean by saying she's never lonely *here?*"

"I don't know, Claud. But now you ask, haven't you noticed how different she is since we came here? Do you remember how listless she was sometimes? I used to get quite worried and think that perhaps I ought to borrow some bright child to keep

her company. But now she's always as happy as the day is long. In fact, to tell the honest truth, I can't help rather missing her moods—or at least her dependence on me. She used so to need me. Don't you remember how she was always imploring me to tell her stories?"

"Doesn't she now?" asked Claud.

"No, nowadays I can scarcely ever persuade her to stay with me. She's always tearing off, as though she had something better to do. It's little I see of her beyond her heels and the back of her head! She's so strangely self-sufficing. Between you and me, Claud, I think she's almost disquietingly happy."

"Disquietingly happy? What do you mean, Laura?"

"Well—I mean—isn't it uncanny? Really, I don't know how to put it into words, but it's—it's as though she had some resource we don't know about. She seems so *occupied*. Yes, that's it—occupied. It sounds too silly, but it's as though being by herself were not being alone. She's grown a queer new sort of smile lately, too, a stealthy sidelong smile, and the comings and goings of that smile don't have any connection with anything other people say or do. Haven't you noticed it? . . . Do you remember what that spooky friend of mine said about Hyacinth?"

"No, I don't," Claud answered shortly. "Some absurdity, I'm sure, from what I know of her."

"She said, 'Now there's a child that should *see* things.' Her 'muddy vesture of decay' is not gross enough to 'close her in.' She said she had what she called, 'listening eyes,' and the most transparent lids she had ever seen. Nonsense I thought it at the

time, but now, Claud, I sometimes wonder. This old place—”

“Oh, Lord! For Heaven’s sake, don’t start any of that psychical bosh.”

Surprised at the annoyance in her husband’s voice, Laura laughed.

“I know, dear, you think no American can come near a stately home in England without peopling it with ghosts, but I assure you I haven’t felt anything sinister here. On the contrary, I am conscious of a something that’s happy—gay—blithe—I don’t know what to call it, but there seems a sort of *liveliness* about the atmosphere of this house—especially upstairs and most especially in that room Hyacinth insisted on taking as her playroom, the old day-nursery.”

“I didn’t want her to use that room,” said Claud gruffly.

“I know, dear, I know,” answered his wife, disturbed by his tone. “But she *insisted*.”

Poor Claud, how wincingly sensitive he was! Of course that room had been his little niece Daphne’s playroom. Very likely she had romped in it just before the tragedy. Laura reproached herself. She should never have allowed Hyacinth to appropriate that particular room. Its associations were too strong for Claud. She should have remembered how he recoiled from any reminder of that poor dead child. Laura shuddered at the thought of the horror of her death. Ten years old. Just the same age as Hyacinth!

“I promise you there’s nothing—sinister in that room,” repeated Laura. “But—please don’t think me silly—I do feel an atmosphere in it, a happy, youthful atmosphere. Whenever I

sit there, memories of my own childhood break out of the past and come thronging around me. I feel the years simply slipping off me." She laughed. "Don't think me crazy, but I actually get funny impulses to play—to dance—to jump about! My toes begin to twiddle. Yes, it's as though there were some invitation in the room. You'll think me too absurd, but it's as if I expected someone to come and look for me. And yet all the time I knew Hyacinth must be in bed and asleep. Sometimes, too, I long to get on the old rocking-horse and have a good gallop. I'd do it too, only I'm so afraid of being caught by one of those very grown-up housemaids."

"Once I could have sworn I heard light, scuffling steps and a sort of soft tittering. Imagination, of course! And yet, I suppose generations and generations of children have played in that room?"

"Yes," said Claud. His voice was forbidding, and as he spoke he raised the *Times*, and held it, like a wall, between himself and any further confidences. Conscious of having irritated him, Laura went away to tell Hyacinth it was bedtime. It was half an hour before she found her up in the hay-loft and then it was very difficult to coax her indoors. At last she handed her over to Bessy, the school-room maid. The moment she returned to the hall her husband rose to go upstairs to say goodnight to Hyacinth.

"I'm afraid you won't find that little flibberty-gibbet in bed," she told him. "I had such a tussle to get her to come in. It's the same thing every night. However late I leave her, she always protests that she hasn't had nearly time enough to play!"

"Not nearly time enough to play?" echoed Claud. "*She* doesn't say that; not Hyacinth?"

"Yes, why shouldn't she?" exclaimed Laura, puzzled by his vehemence.

But, giving no answer, Claud left the room. At dinner Laura asked him why he had been so struck by Hyacinth's words. He said he had no idea to what she alluded, he couldn't remember her quoting Hyacinth. It must be one of her "silly fancies."

Puzzled and hurt, Laura dropped the subject. Claud did not look well and that expression of strain was very noticeable. How had the old vicar described it? "As though he were trying to remember something?" No, she didn't think that was what the look in Claud's cavernous grey eyes suggested. But when she tried to define it to herself, she felt completely baffled.

A few days later, the Halyards were walking in the garden. A strong wind blew, the trees were bare, and crisp leaves, the colour of Hyacinth's hair, pattered round their feet. As usual their thoughts turned on their adored child.

"I thought Hyacinth looked very pale at luncheon," said Claud.

"Yes," answered his wife. "Naughty child, she went out last night!"

"Out?"

"Yes. Bessy found her shoes and stockings drenched this morning, and the little wretch confessed she had gone out long after we were in bed. Just think how cold it must have been! She wouldn't tell me why, and when I said she must promise not to do it again, she burst into tears."

"Little sprite!" laughed Claud. "She still thinks of sleep as so

much waste of time. I wonder if—Heavens! Laura. Just look at her now! What *is* she doing? I never saw a child run so fast, all by herself!”

Hyacinth, her face wildly tense, flashed past them on long, spindly legs. Her speed, surprising for her age, never slackened until, with arms outstretched to touch it, she reached an acacia tree, at the foot of which, panting and laughing, she flung herself to the ground.

Her parents approached.

“Well done, Hyacinth! You *did* run fast!”

“I nearly won that time!” gasped the excited child, her green eyes blazing. “Oh so, so nearly!”

“You nearly *won*! What do you mean, ‘you nearly won’? Were you racing one leg against the other ”

Hyacinth flushed, smiled nervously, sprang to her feet and in an instant had run out of sight behind the great yew hedge.

“Funny child!” said her mother, with an uneasy laugh. “She’s always running off, just as though she had an appointment elsewhere. She never seems to need me now. Do you remember what a treat she used to think it to sleep with me. Now she never wants to. You know, Claud, it sounds ridiculous, but nowadays when I go into her room, I feel as if I were—intruding—interrupting.”

As she spoke, Laura gave a slight shudder. Her own words seemed to crystallize vague misgivings of which she had scarcely been aware.

“Interrupting?” echoed Claud. “Interrupting what?”

“I don’t know,” she answered hopelessly, and, sighing, turned towards the house.

Claud whistled for his dogs and set off for a long walk.

That evening Laura went to see Hyacinth in bed.

"Darling," she said, wheedlingly, "wouldn't you like to come and sleep with Mummie tonight? We'll have early morning tea and play Ludo on my big pillow."

An anxious look flitted across the child's sweet but rather set face.

"Thank you, Mummie," she answered, shyly, but decidedly, "but I am so happy in my own lovely room. I love it, and I don't think it would like to be left."

Intense relief shone in her bright eyes when in silent acquiescence her mother kissed her good-night.

"Good Mummie, sweet Mummie," she cooed, and with a little ecstatic wriggle turned her radiant face towards the window.

It was very late before Laura rejoined her husband after dinner. The great bow-window in the hall was uncurtained and the moonlight streamed in, its slanting green shafts mingling with the red flicker from the great fire by which Claud sat, an unopened book on his knee.

"Wherever have you been all this time, Laura?" he asked, searching her face. "I hope Hyacinth hasn't been up to any more of her pranks?"

"No," Laura answered quickly. "But *I* have."

"What do you mean?"

"*I've* been what you'd call silly. You remember I told you about those funny feelings I get in the playroom? Well, directly after I left you over your coffee, I felt I must go up there. Don't frown, Claud, I couldn't help it. I simply *had* to go. My feet just took me there. Well, as I came along the passage, I

heard a faint noise—a queer sort of rushing noise. I opened the door. What do you think I saw, Claud? The rocking-horse was plunging to and fro—galloping furiously—*without a rider!*”

“Well,” said Claud, “no doubt Hyacinth heard your steps, and, knowing she ought to be in bed, jumped off and ran out of the other door.”

“So I thought—so I *hoped!* But I rushed straight to her room, and found her fast asleep.”

“Then it must have been one of the maids.”

“No, there was no one about. They were all at supper. When I got back to the playroom, the rocking-horse was gradually subsiding. I watched it and soon it was quite motionless.”

“No? You *do* surprise me!” jeered Claud.

“The queer thing,” said Laura solemnly, “was that even while the rocking-horse galloped so fast, the empty stirrups did not swing. No, they were quite taut—stretched forward—just as if—”

“What *are* you driving at, Laura?” exclaimed Claud, angrily. “What have you been reading? What have you been eating? Rocking-horse, indeed! Rocking night-mare you mean! I never even knew Hyacinth had a rocking-horse. Who gave it to her?”

“No one. We found it here. It was Daphne’s. Surely you must remember it. Vermillion nostrils and minus a tail. But, Claud, do you mean to say—haven’t you ever been in the playroom since you came home?”

“No.”

“How extraordinary!”

“Why should I?” Claud’s voice was fierce and he glared at his wife.

"Quite, quite!" said Laura nervously, startled by the expression on his face. Why, for a second he had looked at her as though he hated her. Claud! her gentle, courteous husband, whose devotion to her was a byword. "Oh, I've forgotten my spectacles," she said, confusedly. "I'll run up and fetch them. I shan't be two minutes."

With this feeble excuse she ran upstairs, leaving her husband moodily staring at the spectacles conspicuously lying on the table where she had just put them.

Five minutes later she returned. Glancing at her, Claud knew that if she had not been flushed, she would have been very pale.

"What's up now?"

With her back to him, Laura stood facing the fire. She spoke quickly, in a very low voice, as though she feared to hear her own words.

"As I neared the playroom, I heard the gramophone; the shuffle of dancing feet, too, I thought; but when I opened the door there was no one in the room! You won't believe me, Claud, but there was no one in the room. No one! And yet a record *had just been put on!* It was *Come Lasses and Lads, Take Leave of Your Dads*. Before I found the electric switch, I thought I felt something very light brush past me. Almost before I was aware of it, it had gone. Oh, so quickly!—just like a little puff of wind. To make sure, I went to all the maids' bedrooms—one of them might have started the gramophone—but they were all in bed. Then I went to Hyacinth's room. I crept in, so as not to wake her if she was asleep, and she was—yes, sound asleep. But as I looked at her, I heard a tap-tap at

the window. It *might* have been a branch. Anyhow it woke her. She sprang up in a second, wide, wide awake, with such a joyful welcoming expression on her excited little face. . . . Then she saw me, and she looked sort of scared and sorry—yes, *very* sorry to see me. Oh, Claud! I couldn't bear the look on her face when she saw me!"

Laura's last words come from her like a cry and, as though appealing against she knew not what, she turned to Claud with outstretched arms.

"Damnation!" he cried, springing to his feet. "I can't stand any more of this! Look here, Laura darling, we'll all three go away tomorrow. It's obvious you need a change. We've been here too long. After all, you're not used to staying like a tree in one place. Besides, it will be great fun to take Hyacinth to London, won't it? Laura, my sweet, darling Laura, say you like this plan?"

"Of course, I should love it," murmured Laura, clasped in his arms.

In her joy at feeling herself swept on this wave of tenderness back into the haven of love in which until recently she had felt so secure, any proposal would have seemed welcome.

If only he would go on looking at her with love in his eyes, what matter where they went? And yet, even in the intensity of her relief, Laura was conscious of the irony of his wanting to leave the home he had always described as an earthly paradise.

It was decided that they should leave the very next day, but alas! when tomorrow came, their plan could not be carried out. Hyacinth had sprained her ankle and was unable to put her

foot to the ground. Told the provoking news, Laura hurried to her daughter's room. She found her sitting up in bed. Her face was flushed and she looked shy.

"Poor darling! This is too sad. However did it happen?"

"I'm so sorry, Mummie." Hyacinth spoke hurriedly and nervously. "But I'm afraid I've been a naughty girl again. Don't be very angry with me, but I went out again last night and—"

"You went out? Oh, Hyacinth darling, you promised you wouldn't!"

"I'm so sorry, Mummie, but it was such a lovely night—such bright, bright moonlight. It made me forget I mustn't and I simply couldn't say no."

"The sooner you learn to say 'no' to yourself, the better. I shan't be able to trust you any more. You've hurt yourself; so I won't scold you, but you must never, never do such a thing again. Anyhow, what happened? How did you hurt your silly self?"

"I had a fall."

"What, running?"

"No," answered Hyacinth reluctantly. "I was climbing a tree."

"Climbing a tree? Good heavens! You might have broken your leg and lain out all night. Which tree?"

"The big elm. The one Daddie made a house in when he was little. A branch broke—"

"Well, you've had what Nannies call a 'natural punishment.' So I won't say any more. Lie still now, until the doctor comes."

After the doctor had bound up Hyacinth's ankle, her mother went to look at the elm tree. She was appalled at the height

of the broken branch. That the child was not more seriously hurt seemed almost a miracle.

She returned to question her.

"You don't mean to tell me you fell from where that branch is broken off right up near the top of the tree?"

"Yes, but you see I paused on so many branches all the way down. I only really fell just the last bit."

"But I had no idea you could climb so high. Surely you can't have got all that way up without any help?"

"Oh, yes, I did!" cried Hyacinth triumphantly. "And *she* climbed even higher, but then of course her legs are a little longer."

"She? Who is 'She'?"

Hyacinth's cheeks crimsoned. Hiding her face, she flung her arms around her mother's neck. Then, peeping up at her and glancing quickly all round the room, she put her forefinger to her lips.

"Don't tell Daddie. Oh, Mummie, please, *please* don't tell!" she pleaded in a scared, panting voice. Not one word more would she say. After that one unguarded moment, her whole being was clenched in silence. At first her mother tried to coax her into an explanation, but, alarmed by her flushed excited face, she took the child's temperature.

Laura did not tell her husband of Hyacinth's strange slip. "*She* climbed even higher?" How could she tell him of that? She dreaded to hear him speak in that new, sharp way, so utterly unlike his old self.

After all, such a fall must have been a considerable shock. No doubt the child had not known what she was saying?

Next day Hyacinth seemed better and Laura made another attempt to cross-question her about her accident, but at the first word of enquiry, the child's flower-like mouth set in a thin hard line, and an expression came into her eyes that was like a shutter between her and her mother.

During the following days she was affectionate but somehow guarded, and Laura felt strangely out of touch with her. On everyone's account she longed for a change of scene and chafed at the enforced postponement. Though now uniformly gentle in his manner, Claud seemed increasingly depressed. Laura was determined to leave the first possible day, but unfortunately Hyacinth's injury turned out more serious than had been supposed, and her ankle took a long time to recover.

No bedridden child had ever been so little trouble. In fact she seemed almost unnaturally contented. While her mother read aloud, she would be politely acquiescent, but her manner was that of one who makes a necessary concession, and waits with as good a grace as can be commanded.

Her delight the moment the book was closed was evident, and when her mother turned to leave the room she would gratefully wave her hand and with a look of relief and a hovering smile of happy expectancy, raise herself on her pillows. Though Laura tried to shut her mind to the impression made by Hyacinth's manner, she could not succeed. Once, stung out of her usual self-control, she cried out, "What is it, Hyacinth? Why are you always waiting now—waiting for me to go?"

A look of fear quivered over the child's sensitive face.

"Waiting? What do you mean, Mummie? Why do you

think I want you to go?" and with unskilled evasiveness she began to talk of irrelevancies—the cat's kittens—the new gardener, the pony that had kicked the groom—anything that came into her head. With a heavy heart and a sense of absurdity, Laura acquiesced in making conversation with the child whose confidence she had once so completely possessed.

Though Hyacinth was full of strange whims, what her mother thought the queerest was her insistence that the rocking-horse be brought into her bedroom.

"But, darling, it will take up so much room. And whatever is the use of a rocking-horse you can't ride?"

But Hyacinth's pale, peaked face set in obstinacy.

"I do want it. I *need* it," was all she would say.

So the shabby old rocking-horse was dragged along the passage and stood in arrested prance at the foot of the child's bed.

That evening, as Laura came into the room, Hyacinth gave a perceptible start, and, turning to her mother in flushed uneasiness, querulously asked, "Aren't I old enough yet, Mother, for people to knock at my door before they come into my room? You always tell me I must knock at your door."

Amazed and hurt, Laura looked at her usually gentle child, whose worried gaze, she noticed, was now fixed on the rocking-horse. Glancing at it herself, her glance became a stare. Was it her fancy, or was it slightly, almost imperceptibly moving?

"Have you been out of bed, Hyacinth?"

"Oh, no, Mummie, why?"

"Only I thought perhaps you had been very naughty and got on the rocking-horse. When I came in I thought it was

just moving, as if it had been in motion and hadn't quite stopped. But of course, it must have been my fancy."

With unwonted eagerness, Hyacinth asked, "Will you read to me now, Mummie?"

"Yes, darling, but before I begin, I must tell you some good news. The doctor says you may get up in a week and the very day after we will take you to London."

"Take me to London?"

Hyacinth's voice was sharp with dismay.

"Yes, darling. Won't it be fun?"

Hyacinth burst into tears.

"Oh, no, Mummie! No, no, no! Please don't take me away from here. I can't go! It wouldn't be fair!"

"What *do* you mean, you absurd child? You'll have a lovely time in London. We'll go to the zoo and Madame Tussaud's and have pink ices at Gunther's. All the treats I used to tell you about in New York."

Hyacinth's eyes welled with tears.

"Oh, please, Mummie," she implored, "don't take me away from here."

"But, my darling, I love you to love this place, but you can't always be here. It will be all the more fun to come back to it." Laura tried to laugh the child out of her distress. "After all, you goose, our home won't run away because we leave it. Everything will be exactly the same when we return."

"I don't know, Mother," sobbed Hyacinth. "You can't tell. I'm afraid to go. Besides, it wouldn't be fair."

"Not fair? What do you mean?" questioned Laura, now completely bewildered.

"Oh! I don't know, Mummie! But I'm so happy here. Mayn't I stay? *Please, please, please!*"

Seeing Hyacinth so over-wrought, Laura said firmly, "We won't talk about it any more now," and began to read aloud to unlistening ears.

The next day, Hyacinth seemed much more sensible. Laura told her their departure was quite settled, and the child made an obvious effort to accept the inevitable with as good grace as possible, but she looked pale and strained and her manner was even more than usually preoccupied.

"She looks as though she were trying to propitiate herself," Laura explained to her husband.

"Trying to propitiate herself? What an absurd phrase!" he laughed. "The ideas you have about that child!"

"I haven't any ideas about her." Laura was astonished by the vehemence of her own voice.

Laura spent most of Christmas Eve decorating a small tree for Hyacinth. When, all gay with glittering tinsel, gilded walnuts and shiny ornaments, she carried it into Hyacinth's room, the child clapped her hands with delight. Saying she would soon be back to light the candles, Laura stood the tree on the table.

On her return she was surprised to find the room softly lit by the glimmer of little wax candles. Hyacinth seemed asleep, but sat up as the door opened. Assuming the child had prevailed on Bessy, the maid, to light the candles, Laura merely said, "Well, I must say, after all my trouble, I do think you might have waited for me. Never mind. Now let's pull the crackers together."

Shamefacedly Hyacinth pointed to the coloured tatters of two dozen exploded crackers. Her bed was strewn with paper caps, mottoes, and little tin trumpets and whistles.

"Sorry, Mummie, I just couldn't wait," she mumbled. "I *love* candles. Flames are such fun, aren't they? May I have some toy fireworks? Please, Mummie! I do love flames!"

"I don't know. I think fireworks are too dangerous."

"Oh, no, Mummie! They aren't! *Please* say I may have some. I know! I'll ask Daddy to give me some. He told me to tell him what I wanted."

Laura went to reprimand Bessy.

"You should have asked me before lighting the candles on the Christmas tree," she said severely. "It wasn't at all safe to leave Miss Hyacinth alone in the room with all those candles alight. There should always be someone standing by with a wet sponge. I'm surprised at you, Bessy."

"I didn't never light no tree, my lady," said the astonished maid. "I haven't been into Miss Hyacinth's room, not for two hours."

Laura hurried back to Hyacinth.

"I don't want to scold you on Christmas Eve, but it was very, very naughty of you to get out of bed to light the candles, when you know perfectly well you're forbidden to put your foot to the ground. And isn't it rather selfish to pull crackers all by yourself?"

"Sorry, Mummie," she said. "So sorry," and impetuously she flung her arms around her mother's neck and kissed her quickly, lovingly, just as she used to in the days when she was lonely.

At last Hyacinth's ankle was sufficiently recovered to allow the Halyards to make all their plans for leaving next day.

That evening, Claud was to dine out with an old school-fellow who lived about four miles away. Before starting, he went up to say good-night to Hyacinth. Her half-packed trunk was open and she was practising getting about the room.

Hopping towards him, she flung her thin arms around his neck. "Don't ruin my tie!" he cried.

"Bother your tie!" she laughed. "Oh, Daddy, darling Daddy. Thank you for the lovely, lovely box of fireworks. Aren't they gorgeous? Look at the lovely pictures on the lid. Whizz-bangs, Catherine-Wheels and all!"

"Oh, they've come, have they? Well, mind, you aren't on any account to touch them. I'll let them off for you the first evening we come home. I'll carry them away now and lock them up somewhere safe."

"Oh, mayn't they stay here, Daddy? I like looking at the pictures on the lid."

"Certainly not. I can't trust you not to touch them."

Hyacinth stood flushed and pouting. Suddenly she turned towards the window.

"Oh look, Daddy," she cried pointing up at the sky. "Look at that great white owl. Oh! what a lovely Mrs. Fly-by-Night! . . . No, Daddy. You're not looking where I'm pointing; can't you see? She's flown over the church tower. There!"

But look where he might, Claud could see no owl. He was still trying to be guided by Hyacinth's erratically-pointed finger, when the butler came in and announced his car.

"Well, then, I must give the owl up," he said. "My friend's a great stickler for punctuality," and, kissing Hyacinth, who made no effort to detain him, he hurried off, quite forgetting his gift, the box of fireworks left lying on the table.

As he was about to step into his car, he overheard a mocking, "To-whit-a-who!" Remembering an accomplishment of Hyacinth's (she could imitate an owl by whistling through her hands) he looked up at her window. Yes, there she was leaning far out, her head gleaming, her face strangely elfin in the moonlight. Claud was startled by her beauty.

"Go to bed, Sprite," he called.

Hyacinth waved her thin white arms.

"Good-night, Daddy. See you in the morning!"

Though bitterly cold, the still, starlight night was so beautiful that Claud decided to walk home. He and his friend found much to say to one another, and it was past midnight when he started back. As he strode across the frozen fields, he began to regret his dismissal of the car. The cold, clear silence was broken only by his own footsteps, the occasional hoot of an owl, and the far off bark of a lonely dog. He felt too much alone in a white, unshared world.

The present, in which Claud always strove to ensconce himself, receded and faded. Quite powerless to shield him from the past, it became a mere dissolving mist.

A man maimed by one memory, he depended on contact with immediate extraneous things to preoccupy him, to hold his attention so closely that his senses should not be re-assailed by haunting sights and sounds from the past. Just now he felt delivered up to the past, wholly undefended by all the intervening years. After all, what were time and space but modes of thought? There could be no putting distance between yourself and any experience. What had the so-called passage of time availed him? Nothing.

Claud Halyard had paid dearly for his inheritance. That strained expression friends noticed on his face, came not from the effort to remember, but from the effort to forget—to expunge from his consciousness memories that gave him no respite.

"And if I seek oblivion of an hour,
So shorten I the stature of my soul."

In Claud's life there was one hour of which he ceaselessly and desperately sought oblivion. Struggle as he might, he was now caught back in that hour, forced to relive each agonizing instant. It was superimposed on his present, and all the impressions of twelve intervening years were powerless to lessen any of its intensity . . .

Twelve years ago! A moonlight night, and, as now, he walked towards Lichen Hall, the home of his childhood, the home that so obsessed his imagination that to him it seemed the core of the entire world. Such love, he felt, should surely establish ownership, but Lichen Hall was not entailed on the male line and, at the death of its present owner, his widowed and crippled brother, would pass to that brother's only child, Daphne, who no doubt in time would marry and transfer all that beauty to strangers.

Brooding thus, he reached the edge of the park. Startled suddenly out of his thoughts, he stood transfixed. What strange, terrifying sounds! God! The alarm-bell in the great tower was clanging—furiously clanging. "Fire! Fire!" he heard.

Sick with dread, he rushed towards the house. Horror-struck, he saw wreaths of smoke curling up to the sky. Terrible crackling sounds came from one wing, and from the little turret tower

in that wing, long ribands of flame fluttered towards the white moon.

Breathless, he reached the lawn. The frantic servants had just carried someone out of the house. His brother! Claud rushed to him. Struggling to raise his paralyzed body, the agonized man clutched at Claud and, pointing towards the house, shrieked, "Daphne! Daphne!"

Claud grasped the full horror of the moment. The fire-brigade had not yet arrived, and his little niece, who slept in the turret tower of the burning wing, had not been got out of the house. The alarm had only just been given, for it was but a few minutes since the servants had been aroused. The fire had gained a strong hold before anyone of them knew of it. So far they had only just had time to carry out their helpless master. The child they hoped would have awakened and made her escape. They expected to find her outside but, to their dismay, she was nowhere to be seen.

With a reassuring shout, Claud dashed into the house. The staircase leading up to the burning wing was already dense with smoke. Claud smashed a window, and, choking, fought his way up and into the stifling room where he saw Daphne on the floor—lying close to the window. The smoke had overcome her. She was unconscious, but breathing. He was in time. It would be quite easy to fling that light burden over his shoulder, dash down the stairs, and carry her safely out into the blessed air. Vividly Claud pictured himself doing this, saw the joy in his brother's eyes.

Simultaneously, an alternate picture presented itself. The child left lying as she was—unconscious, not suffering, not dreading, not knowing, just *not reawaking*, unaware . . . His own future? Lichen Hall?

His body seemed to act without any conscious volition. Something took command of his limbs. "I never told myself to do it! I never told myself!"

How often thereafter was he to utter those words!

Stooping, he lifted that light body. The burnished red-gold hair brushed against his cheek. In a moment he had shoved her out of sight beneath the bed. Now for the almost impassable stairs. He emerged choking. "I can't find her!" he gasped to the horrified crowd. "She's not in her room. She must have got out."

His brother screamed despairingly.

Two minutes later the fire brigade dashed up. Claud took control, directing the firemen to search for Daphne in every room except her own—the one in which she lay.

At last he saw the glowing, writhing roof of the little turret tower fall in.

Soon the flames were extinguished.

All the pictures were saved.

The coroner's verdict: "Unfortunately, the poor girl had taken refuge beneath her bed and therefore her gallant uncle was unable to find her."

Daphne's father—God, his eyes!

Once again Claud re-lived each moment of that fatal hour twelve years ago. Shaking, dripping with perspiration, he struggled back into the present. But still he saw his brother's eyes. Had he loved his Daphne as I love my Hyacinth? At the thought, Claud's heart contracted agonizingly. Suppose he had. Why not? Was she not as lovely, as piercingly sweet and young? Her eagerness! Had he not loved her himself—his dear little niece? The "perfect playfellow," he used to call her. That very last evening he had said goodnight to her in her little Carpaccio bed.

"Time to go to sleep," he had told her.

"Oh, bother sleep!" she had wheedled, plaiting her fingers around his and imploring him to stay. "I haven't had nearly time enough to play."

Once more he felt the light burden in his arms, the unconscious little body that would so easily have revived to entertain its eager spirit, to welcome it back to the life it loved. "Not nearly time enough to play!" Claud's mind writhed from the past to the present, to the past again and back to the present—"Not nearly time enough to play!"

The galloping, riderless rocking-horse? Hyacinth running races all by herself? His wife's strange impulses? Hide-and-Seek?—All these queernesses flitted through his thoughts.

He was near his home now, almost home again to Laura and Hyacinth, and tomorrow night they would all three be far from here. But in the meantime he was still so much in the grip of a twelve-year-old memory, that he seemed actually to hear that awful clanging of the alarm bell and the cries of, "Fire! Fire!"

Heavens! how *real*, how outside himself these sounds seemed! But this was past bearing! Were his senses hopelessly haunted? This way lay madness. He must go away—let the house—return to America.

The sounds in his ears were insistent—grew louder. Louder and louder. The illusion was complete.

God! Were they actual? Could it really be *now*?

Tearing around the turn that brought the distant house into view, Claud stared. Yes, it was true! The present and the past had fused. The bell—the mad shouting—they were actual, immediate!

It was twelve years later, but Lichen Hall was again on fire—burning furiously. How could a fire have taken such strong hold? Every modern device for extinguishing an outbreak had been installed.

Claud dashed up the hill and on to the lawn. This time it was the other wing which had caught fire, the west wing in which he, Laura and Hyacinth slept. The top story was already a furious blaze. A crowd stared upward, pale faces red in the reflected flare. That shrieking woman, desperately struggling to escape from the arms that held her back—could that be his wife?

Disjointedly, from various voices, Claud learned the situation. The water-supply was frozen; all the pipes were useless. The telephone wires were broken down, but the car had gone for the fire brigade. It should be here any moment now. In the meantime, the child—his child—was upstairs, and the wooden staircase was impassable, was already so before anyone was aware of the fire's outbreak. His wife had not yet gone to bed and, as only the family slept in that wing, no one else was there. The child was all alone up there, trapped in that red horror, and the longest ladder could not reach the window of her room. A second ladder? Yes, they were tying two together with ropes, and several men had offered to climb up.

No, Claud insisted on going himself. Thank God! the ladders were now securely joined. There was still time, but none to lose. Soon the roof must fall in.

The ladder had been placed against the wall under Hyacinth's room. Claud's foot was already on its second rung when something caught his eye. At the window, three to the right of the one to which he was climbing, he saw a child appear. The win-

dow was open, and her long, thin arms were outstretched, her head gleaming in the flaring light.

"Move the ladder, quick!" Claud yelled. "She's not in her bedroom. She's gone into the playroom. There! Over there! Can't you see her? There, leaning out of that window!"

No one else saw anything, but they obeyed blindly. There was a rush forward, and eager arms carried out his orders. The ladder was dragged away to the window at which Claud pointed. Cheers rang out. Claud climbed up, up . . .

Near the top, he raised his head and found himself staring into the smiling face of the girl who had perished in the flames twelve years ago. As he stared, transfixed, the lovely smiling face blurred and faded away.

No one was there.

With a cry no one below could ever forget, Claud hurled himself back down the ladder.

"The other window!" he gasped. "Back to the other window!"

Unbelievably quickly the ladder was shifted, but not quickly enough. The few minutes' delay had been fatal. Just as the fire engines roared up the drive, the roof fell in.

Again every picture had been saved, and a little body recovered.

The Nurse Never Told

I CAN'T think why, but I feel an impulse to set it all down. Where shall I begin? I suppose with the very first time I saw him: one evening towards the end of my sixth month's duty in this nursing-home, and just about nine years after I, as my friends derisively put it, "found my vocation" and threw up my university career to train as a nurse.

After the long succession of withered old patients, afraid to die rather than anxious to live, who occupied that drab little room, it was an almost startling change to find so much vitality vibrating through its subdued atmosphere.

The first time I came into his room he was in the attitude that was to become so familiar to me. His knees, against which was propped the book he was devouring, (he always read as though he expected the book to be snatched from him), were drawn right up and, as his head lay flat on the low pillow, all I could see from the door was a cliff of bed-clothes and one lean brown hand. As I came in, down shot the knees (all his movements

were sudden) and a rumpled dark head sprang up and banged itself against the back of the bed. Strongly-marked eyebrows rose unevenly, a quick smile split the rugged expressive face, and, with a peculiar sense of recognition, my gaze met very wide-open dark grey eyes blazing with intelligence and zest.

I suppose the look of intense eagerness was what struck me most in the alert and peculiarly individual face. I also noticed the remarkably deep cleft in the strong chin, and the scar on his brow which, as he afterwards told me, was the result of a horse's kick.

I always dislike night-duty, and that evening I felt especially disinclined for my vigil, but from my new patient's first words of laughing apology as I stooped to pick up the book, (*An Experiment in Time*, I noticed it was called) that his violent movement had flung face downwards on to the floor, I felt exhilarated: alive, interested, personal—no longer the uniformed robot I had latterly begun to seem even to myself. I knew all about my "case." The young Australian had come into the nursing-room to be operated on for a tumour on the brain, and I was glad to remember that Cuthbert Green, the doctor to whom I was supposed to be engaged, had said it was a quite easily operable tumour and that he was not in the least anxious.

My patient's symptoms, so he soon told me, had been attacks of terrible headaches and intermittent hemianopsia and giddiness.

As I inspected his chart, I thought what a strangely suitable name Lionel Heath was, especially when he told me that his friends never used the last syllable of his Christian name.

We were soon talking—not merely conversing, but really

talking, asking questions to which one eagerly wanted to hear the answer, comparing tastes and distastes, loves, hates, moods, fears, hopes and doubts. I felt my mind quicken, expand. It was so long since anyone I talked to had seemed to want more than just to peck at its surface. Much as I liked my work, it was pleasant to find myself again thinking of my nurse's uniform as a sort of fancy dress in which the real me was thinly disguised. Of late I had had a rather horrid sense of that real me being almost quite obscured by the fancy dress.

Though extreme liveliness was the keynote of my patient's face, it was not long before I noticed a recurring expression that seemed wholly inconsistent with my first impression of him. Every now and then the radiance I felt to be so characteristic clouded over and a preoccupied, troubled look came into his eyes, a look that suggested an effort to forget, to drive out some disquieting thought, memory, or prospect. Occasionally he would literally shake his head as though determined to dislodge some gate-crasher from his mind.

Most nights he slept badly. It was not so much that he stayed awake as that the quality of his sleep was obviously very poor—a thin, disturbed sort of sleep. He usually woke up with that rather tortured expression in his eyes, and it would be some few minutes before his natural brightness began to break through a kind of fog. He never showed any wish to go to sleep and it was only my professional conscience that after a time (pretty late it must be admitted) would make me sternly refuse to continue talking. Then he would ask me to read poems aloud to him, begging for one favorite after another.

I am never able to sleep much in the day-time, but not once

during all those nights that I sat up with Lionel Heath did I feel tired or even sleepy. Each vigil shines clear in my memory; and as for the days, soon they were merely so many disregarded bridges between the nights.

A shimmering week passed, a week of buoyant excitement and strange contentment, and all the time a lovely sense of undefined expectancy.

Only two more nights now before his operation. "Operation?" What a terribly reinstated word! Thanks to the deadening effect of custom the word had grown to mean so little to me. Was it the prospect of this operation—one my fiancé (as my fellow-nurses would call Cuthbert) insisted held no risk—that made me, as I dressed to come on duty that night, gird on my uniform so to speak, as though it were a suit of armour? Unduly anxious, was I invoking the aid of its autosuggestive power to control my growing perturbation, to rally the dwindling "*Nurse Ryan*" and repress the resuscitated *Laura Ryan*?

"Well, and how are we tonight?" I asked with rather dreadful professional brightness.

Why did I use the odiously facetious "we" of the profession? Was it a rather pitiful attempt at a kind of anonymity? By assuming my most typically professional manner, did I hope to keep myself impersonal?

In his inevitable position, knees drawn right up above the level of his head, he was reading with the rapidity and concentration most people give only to some anxiously awaited telegram. As on every other evening, down shot the wall of bed-clothes and up sprung the tousled head. At sight of his welcoming grin, all my resolution melted and I felt myself smile an utterly unperfunctory, hopelessly personal smile.

"Still reading that stuff?" I asked, pointing to the clutched copy of *An Experiment in Time*.

"Yes, Nurse," he answered, the sort of tender banter in his voice definitely placing the word "Nurse" between quotation marks. "Yes, the 'stuff', as you so politely call it, enthalls me. Do you dream much, Nurse?"

"No," I answered. "That is to say, I dream quite a lot of gibberish but I never dream at all constructively. My sleep is only a silly burlesque of my waking life. For instance, suppose I had been giving a blanket-bath, I might dream my patient was a pig instead of a person; or after an interview with the doctor, in my dream that night I should perhaps take my instructions from a penguin or a pelican—any absurdity like that."

"But," he asked, "do your dreams burlesque only the *past*? According to this book one's dreams are just as likely to mirror, or perhaps travesty, the future as the past."

"I know," I said. "I've read the book."

"Do you believe the theory?" he asked, eagerly.

"I don't see why not."

I answered guardedly. There was an excited glare in his eyes, and I had been told his mind should be kept quiet.

"It absolutely fascinates me," asserted my patient. "Doesn't it rather suggest that the restrictions of time are really merely a convention?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, doesn't it look as though in moments of heightened sensibility human beings might slip through the veil that separates the past, the present and the future, and meet in a *now* that to some is the past and to others the future?"

I could not remember Dunn's arguments very clearly. Did the

book contain anything like that, or did he use its theories as starting-points for queer conjectures of his own?

"Mightn't it all depend just on the mere shifting of the focus?" he pressed. "The subject absolutely fascinates me."

("Fascinates?"—hardly the word for the expression in his eyes.)

"Now, what about a spot of sleep?" I asked with deliberate facetiousness.

He looked almost feverish, and I was determined to keep the conversation commonplace. But I had overdone the nurse-jargon. "A spot of sleep?" Just about as convincing a disguise as if I had clapped on a false nose! His funny, lop-sided smile lifted his face.

"I wish *my* dreams burlesqued reality, as you call it," he said through a feigned yawn.

"Do you dream a great deal, Mr. Heath?" (Strange still to be calling him Mister!)

"Do I dream?" he blurted out. "My God! I am sure it's my dreams that have somehow caused this infernal illness!"

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed, my professional sense in arms, and now thoroughly alarmed by the expression in his eyes.

Deliberately unconcerned, I silently shook up his pillows, straightened the sheets and flicked down the thermometer. While busying myself with trivial actions, I had that queer sensation one sometimes gets—that one is re-living some indescribably remote previous experience. Then in my most casual voice:

"You have bad night mares, do you?"

"Incredible!"

"Well, Mr. Heath, I am now going—doctor's orders—to give you such a strong sleeping-draught that I am quite sure you won't have any dreams at all tonight."

"I won't take it," he said determinedly, looking up at me above the pipe cupped in his brown hands. "I don't want to go to sleep. In fact, I *won't* go to sleep. I daren't!"

"Come, come, Mr. Health. It can't be as bad as all that."

"Oh, *can't* it!" came the bitter cry.

Then the floodgates opened. Like blood from a severed artery, the words came out in spurts.

I listened raptly, not so much by his words as by his voice, and the horror in his eyes. At last I began to understand the strange blight that had always seemed so much at variance with his natural radiance. I had always known—one gets to know these things instinctively—that it was not the operation that he dreaded. No, I had never really thought that was what lay so heavily on his mind.

I will give the gist of what he blurted out as much in his own words as possible. He never looked at me, no—not one glance, not even in any of the rather long pauses. No, his hands clenched, their knuckles showing white, he stared straight in front of him.

"You see, it's a recurring dream, the same excruciating dream, but with endless variations. It began when I was only a boy, and since then it comes again and again. Sometimes not for months. Sometimes almost every night for weeks. It's—it's always connected with the same face—a face I know better—can see far more vividly than any in my so-called actual life."

"Is it an unpleasant face?" I asked.

"No! It's not. Not at all. I know in stories the obsession, the Familiar—or whatever you like to call it, is always described as in some way hauntingly horrible—perhaps indefinitely deformed or loathsomely malignant. You know the sort of description? No, in itself there is nothing wrong with the face. Nothing whatever. It is only my *associations* with it that are so appalling. It's a very distinctive face though—very good-looking, except for the protruding ears. But he limps—limps very badly. The first time I dreamt of him I could not see his face—he was a reclining figure, so the heavy limp was my first impression, an intensely strong impression. I can't bear to see anyone limp now."

"Is he cruel to you?" I ventured.

"No, no! far worse than that! I am cruel to him. You see, it isn't in the least like an ordinary nightmare. The face and the limp are not connected with any *physical* danger to me. Oh, no! The dream is that I myself am always vile—unspeakably vile to him. He is always powerless, or anyhow unresisting and unrepachable—somehow acquiescent—and I wake up sick with shame—loathing myself, convinced that there must be something in my waking self to account for my vileness in the dream. I cannot rid myself of a sense of responsibility for such loathsome cruelty. It is as though in some indefinable way my nerves, though not my mind were reminded of some inexplicable complicity—but reminded is far too definite a word. As far as I know I am utterly without any tendency to cruelty, but with this man of my dreams I am—but, oh! I can't tell you about it! It is as though I were under some terrible, irresistible compulsion. Can there be in my real, my waking self some unrealised compli-

ance that gives some vile force a hold over me? Or is the face connected with something in the forgotten past or the unrevealed future? In some way—in some unsurmisable, sinister way our two fates must have been, or are to be, interwoven!

"I can't possibly hope to convey the hideous horror of the dream. To know one is to be infinitely atrocious—and yet to be utterly unable to stop oneself! To keep one's judgement, but not one's control! You know the old feeling—to me it now seems a blessedly banal nightmare—when you want and expect to run away from some physical danger, some pursuing terror, but find you can't budge, simply can't move your legs? Well, it seems just as easy not to do whatever vile thing I feel I am about to do, as to run away, but the same sort of paralysis overtakes me—a powerless anguish! It is, as I have already said, as though I were a mere instrument under some irresistible alien control. And then—then there's one other face that quite often comes into my dream, always just after some sickening climax."

"Another face? What sort of a face?"

"It's a woman's face—a face that ought to be beautiful, but it's distorted by a kind of malignant, gloating triumph. Revenge is a passion I've never been able to understand. But when I have done things, she looks—oh, how shall I describe it? She looks *sated*. Yes! there's no other word for it. Sated is what she looks! Sated—as though she had got her will. And then she *smiles*! My God, how she smiles! *Why* should I dream of those two faces? *Why? Why?*"

"Probably some obvious explanation if only —we could get at it," I said, as briskly as if I had been asked for some quite simple prescription. "Are you sure it is always the same *face* and that

it isn't just the limp that has become an obsession? Do you really see the face in detail?"

"I tell you, I see it as clearly as I see yours now, and, as I said, it's a peculiarly distinctive face, an unforgettable face—extraordinarily alert and sensitive. Exceptionally far-apart eyes, magnificent forehead, straight nose. In fact, he would be remarkably good-looking, if it wasn't that his ears stuck out so much. It's a face one would like. It's what *I* bring into his face that haunts me."

Violently shaking his head, he pressed his fingers against his eyelids as though struggling to obliterate some persistent image.

"And the face of the woman who smiles? Does that remind you of anyone you have ever seen, or of any photograph?"

"No! Oh, *no*! No one. No one at all!" he disclaimed almost before my question was finished.

(Why did I know for certain that this time, for the first time, he was not speaking the truth?)

"Anyhow, you won't see either face tonight," I said authoritatively, for I felt deeply concerned about him. His manner disquieted me so much more than his words.

"Shan't I, Nurse?" he said, with an especially strong inflexion on the last word.

("Nurse?" How wonderful I had once thought that appellation!)

With absent-minded docility, he swallowed the extra strong narcotic I gave him. I forced him to talk of other things, and then sat by his side and watched him drift into a deep sleep that I felt confident was not troubled by any dream.

When I came on duty next night I brought with me the

newspaper in which I was doing the crossword. Anxious to avoid any further reference to his recurring nightmare, I hoped the puzzle might be a good distraction, and, admitting myself completely baffled by one clue, I handed him the paper to fill up the remaining blanks.

"What can seventeen down be?—'Not a short horse in Australia'." I asked. "It absolutely stumps me. Perhaps it's geography—my weakest spot."

I heard his pencil rapidly filling in the puzzle.

"Not a short horse in Australia?" came his voice from behind his raised knees. "Well, that's easy enough—of course, it's the town, Geelong."

"Never heard of the place," I answered. "What an encyclopedia you are! Do you know absolutely everything?"

"Well," he laughed. "You forget I come from Australia and it would be odd if I didn't know Geelong considering it was there I happened to have been born."

"You were born at Geelong? How funny!"

"Why is it funny? I suppose some people must be born at Geelong, mustn't they?"

"Well, it is rather a comic name, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. I never thought about it," he said with a laugh—a laugh that was severed by the cry: "My God!"

My back was towards him. I was filling in his temperature chart. At his cry I spun round and saw his face was livid, his eyes glaring at the newspaper that shook in his hands. He pointed to the photograph above the head-line, 'Engagement of Brilliant Young Surgeon.' I recognised a very well-known face.

"That's it!" he gasped.

"What?"

"The *face*!"

"The face you dream about?"

"Yes. Look! Look at the width between the eyes, the sticking-out ears—everything!"

Wide eyes? Protruding ears? I remembered then that when he first spoke of this combination some unrecognised association had stirred in my mind. Yes, of course! John Steele, the most brilliant of all the young surgeons.

I tried to laugh it off, saying—Heaven forgive me!—almost heartily, "Well, you couldn't dream of anyone nicer. He's said to be the most universally liked man in the profession as well as the most promising, or rather—in spite of his youth—the *arrived* surgeon of the day."

"But why, *why* in Heaven's name should I always dream of him?"

"Don't you think you may have seen his photograph somewhere and been struck by his face?" I hazarded. "It's such a very remarkable face."

"How could I have seen him when I've never set foot in England before? He's never been in Australia, has he?"

"Not that I know of. He certainly hasn't had time since he qualified, and he started training at seventeen. But you could easily have seen a photograph of him, couldn't you?"

"How long has he been famous?" he jerked out. "I mean—likely to have his photograph in the papers?"

"Oh, I should think about five years."

"I started dreaming of the face ten years ago," he said conclusively.

"Well, isn't it," I said at a venture, "rather a comfort to find the face—if it really *is* the face—belongs to so thoroughly nice a person?"

The inanity of my words amazed me.

"No," came the answer in that frozen voice. "No, it makes me more than ever feel that I am going mad, but I wish to God the going could be quicker!"

"Mr. Heath," I said, tightening my precarious hold on my professional manner, "you really must pull yourself together. I feel quite certain that once you've had your operation, you won't be troubled any more by this queer fancy. I am quite sure that it is something to do with the pressure on the brain. A mere coincidence—a chance similarity between one dream and another exaggerated until it became an absolute obsession. And now it is just the *fear* of dreaming it that makes you dream it."

"Do you really think so?" he said, with a smile that defeated me. Such a pitiful, painstakingly hoisted smile, instead of the usual lightning grin that split his face and shot one eye-brow high above the other.

In vain I tried to wrench his mind on to other topics. He would persist in cross-examining me about Steele. He wanted to know everything about the young surgeon, his age, his attainments, which year he had taken his degree, his appointments—everything.

"Have *you* ever seen anyone else with such wide-apart eyes *plus* the sticking-out ears?" he pressed.

"No, I don't suppose I have," I admitted. "But then Steele doesn't *limp*! And I remember you particularly emphasized the fact that your—your dream-man limped."

"Are you *sure* he isn't lame?" he asked searchingly.

"Steele lame?" I laughed. "I should think not! He was an athletic blue at Cambridge, and only last winter he won a skiing competition."

As if at last resolved to dismiss the subject, Lion, (as I now always thought of him,) shrugged his shoulders and appeared to concentrate on pressing the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, but soon his hand reached out for the inevitable book. Up went the knees, and over the pretense of my knitting I watched his peering-forward face, and his excited eyes flicker across the quickly turned pages of *An Experiment in Time*.

"Of course, they're never accurate," I heard him mutter. "Always rather travesties. Yes, that's what they are, travesties!"

"What are travesties?" I asked.

"Dreams, Nurse, dreams!"

For some time he read on. I was supposed to be turning a heel in a stocking and I tried to concentrate on counting my stitches. Suddenly his laugh jabbed into a charged silence.

"Funny coincidence if he had been going to operate on *me*, wouldn't it be?"

"Yes. Your surgeon, Dr. Glossop, is certainly a very different type. Such a dear, fat, comfortable old thing!"

"He's not likely to come here to this nursing home, is he? Steele, I mean."

"Oh no! There are only two other surgical cases in the home at present and they are both Dr. Glossop's patients. But," I continued, rushing my fence, "perhaps it would really be rather a good thing if you did see him some day. Either you would realize he wasn't the man you dreamt of, or else you'd find there

wasn't really anything to dread. Anyway mightn't it rather, so to speak, lay the ghost?"

He raised himself on his pillows.

"If ever I saw that man," he said with an intensity that made me feel as though an icy breath from some quite other world had invaded the over-heated little room, "If ever I saw that man, I should have to run away from *myself*, even though I were dying!"

I suppose my face must have shown how much his manner alarmed me. I saw him obviously brace himself into control. He finished the crossword and then even exerted himself to make the little pleasantries customary between patient and nurse.

"What time is my execution the day after tomorrow, Nurse?"

"Half-past eight," I answered, readily tuning in to his change of key. "The butchers will be here by eight. You will be given an injection in your own bed and then wheeled in, so you won't even see—what we so brightly call—the 'theatre'."

"Will you be there to see me cut up?"

"No, thank you!" I answered playfully. "In this well-ordered establishment nurses on night-duty do *not* do theatre-work. No, I shall be off duty. They'll keep you more or less unconscious and by the time you come to you'll find me sitting here with my knitting and my crossword just as usual."

"That will be nice," he said simply, and gave an exaggerated stretch.

"Now for your sleeper," I said, taking my cue.

"Yes," he acquiesced without his accustomed protest. "And make it strong!"

Settling himself down, he burrowed deep into his pillows

and began to breathe with studied regularity just like a child pretending to be asleep. At one moment I was almost deceived by his rhythmic breathing, but looking at his hands I saw they were still tightly clenched, the knuckles standing out white through the stretched brown skin.

Flinging back the bedclothes, he suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Nurse!" he cried. "You didn't lie to me, did you? What's his name—that surgeon fellow doesn't limp, does he?"

"No, of course not. What ever put such an absurd notion into your head?" I said, rather angrily for the hundredth time wishing he were the right age for my dreadful Go-to-sleep-you-foolish-child manner.

"Sorry to be such an ass," he said, shamefacedly, and burrowed down again.

The studied breathing was resumed, and I knew that he was at once struggling against the effect of a strong dose of Medinol and feigning sleep. But it was not long before the drug prevailed, and a chill sense of aloneness, of being left behind, came over me as I sat listening to the regular breathing of genuine sleep. I felt my own vitality sink.

Next day before going to bed, I had an early luncheon with Cuthbert. Should I tell him of the strange trouble his patient had confided to me? No, he was not very interested in the psychological side of his calling, and I despaired of making him understand how disturbed I had been. No doubt he would dismiss the whole matter as a ridiculous obsession.

Reliable as an expensive well-wound watch, Cuthbert was his usual kind, affectionate self, but how often I caught myself noticing the fixity of his not very sensitive face and the flatness

of his voice! I suppose I missed the hair-trigger responsiveness, the sudden gleams and lifts of that other face in which life glowed and leapt, and the flattering, stimulating effect of a lively voice.

Not for one moment did Cuthbert make me forget how desperately tired I was.

Just as I rose to leave, his telephone rang.

"Don't go," he said, lifting the receiver. "Oh, I *am* sorry. What bad luck!" my sleepy ears heard him say. Then, turning to me: "Damn! That ass Glossop's gone and sprained his wrist and can't possibly operate tomorrow. Nuisance! I don't want to postpone that brain-case. Let's see. Who could I get? I know who I'll try for." He dialled rapidly, and in a second spoke in a very pleased voice. "Good! it's you yourself." (How fatuous people look grinning into a telephone, I thought.)

I heard him give details of the case, the address of the nursing home, and so forth; then his voice became very insistent. "No, no! I can't let you off. It's bad luck on you, but, as you had told me you were going to take two days off, you can't plead any professional alibi. You've got to help me out. No escape! By tomorrow morning you will have spent more than enough of your valuable time reading—what do you call the book? *An Experiment in Time*."

The coincidence of the familiar title made me jump.

"Very well then," went on Cuthbert's voice, now very relieved. "That's settled. I'll expect you at nine o'clock. Thanks, awfully."

"Good," he said, turning to me. "I've got him."

"Who?"

"Why, Steele of course! Steele himself. None other. Bit of luck. What?"

"Steele!" I gasped, and heard my own gasp at the shock. I heard my heart beat, felt my cheeks burn scarlet.

"But Laura, why don't you look pleased? Steele's worth half a dozen of old Podge-Thumbs. If ever I saw surgical genius, it's his. You'd think he'd got a separate brain in each finger. What fingers? Strong as steel—what a pun!—but with a touch like a butterfly's wing! What on earth's upset you, Laurakins? You're not in love with him, are you?"

Even in the state I was in, I felt a jab of irritation at this reach-me-down of a joke. Should I try to tell him about the amazing and, as it seemed to me, strangely disquieting coincidence? *Ought* I to? But I was almost certain he would ridicule the whole thing. Just a chance likeness to the mere figment—(yes, that was the cliché) the mere figment of someone *else's* dream! And yet? And yet? Thoughts circled and collided in my brain. Yet, I *must* try to explain—beg Cuthbert to postpone the operation. But, just as my fists were clenching in resolve, the telephone rang summoning Cuthbert to an urgent case. A hurried, clumsy kiss and he was gone. Too late! Baffled but relieved, I went back to have a bath and some blessed sleep.

As I dressed to go on duty, I considered telephoning to Cuthbert, but at the mere thought of his sturdy common-sense the whole affair seemed to fade into something too fantastic to put into words and, rested as I was, much of my uneasiness dispersed. Naturally Lion himself need not know of the change of surgeon and, after all, what did it all amount to? Wide-apart eyes and protruding ears must often be combined. Far the most

salient thing in Lion's description was the limp and, no doubt, it was this infirmity that so persistently haunted him. Quite likely in his overstrung condition, the photograph of almost any striking face would seem to fit in with the one—probably not nearly so definite as he supposed—of his dreams.

Had the surgeon whose face he claimed to recognise been a man with a limp—so I argued to myself—then coincidence would have been too startling. As it was, I decided to try to dismiss the whole matter from my mind.

Eight o'clock. Time to go to Lion. As always, I clearly visualised the tame little room and its incongruous occupant long before I reached its door. Yes, there he was with his wide, welcoming grin and that strange knack of looking far more intensely alive than anyone else in the world. Really his eyes seemed to light up the whole room. Sometimes you almost felt the force of his vitality must explode that pale, gadgetted little apartment. This evening I was conscious of the life within him pulsing like a great dynamo. I could see the strong pulse of his wrist, and while I counted its beats, I found myself picturing him in surroundings less inappropriate. All at once it was as though the pastel-shaded walls dissolved, and I could see bending trees, journeying clouds, and feel strong sweet air on my face. I had a distinct vision of Lionel walking very fast up a grassy hill. I could picture the exact length and swiftness of his stride and how, as he strode along, he would throw back his windswept head and swing his long arms. How strong his arms looked! How light, how exquisitely light those arms might make one feel!

Determined to suppress the unprofessional part of my per-

sonality I found myself literally fingering the starched collar and cuffs of "Nurse Ryan," as though they were emblems that I could invoke to revive her dwindling domination. Making an unnecessary stir and bustle, I busied myself with my little jobs. I struggled desperately hard to concentrate on the actual and immediate, but my imagination was hopelessly out of control. Uninvited pictures filled my mind. Suddenly one overpoweringly vivid vision made me gasp! I, who had grown so utterly case-hardened to everything to do with operations, felt myself stiffen with horror as I visualized that strong, restless body lying rigid in unconsciousness. The operating-theatre and all its equipment had long since ceased to hold any particular thrill for me, had indeed come to seem almost as everyday, as humdrum, as a bathroom. Now, however, all my injured senses regained, but a hundred times intensified, their original excruciating sensitiveness. White tiles, glittering instruments, masked faces, enamel bowls. Cold, sterilized, infinitely threatening; all the paraphernalia of aseptic surgery gleamed before my eyes. Agonized, something made me look in the glass. Had that trim façade of uniform lost all its wonderfully effectual depersonalising power?

I still *looked* quite trim, cool and efficient.

"Satisfied, Nurse?" came his chuckling voice, and I turned and saw a grin of tender derision. My fears swam away. The immediate present reclaimed me. The love that all these days had slowly, laughingly been rising between us surged up and, as trying to speak in my most professional voice I bent over him with a glass of medicine, I felt a sweet, dizzy awareness come over me. Something hovering between us seemed almost to be-

come visible in the air. For one quivering second I knew he was about to speak. Yes, he was going to tell me. Then in his eyes I saw gathering resolve check impulse. As clearly as though he had actually spoken them my mind took in the words "Not until it is over." The brimming moment passed. A thin veil of normality was imposed on surging magic. So close rapture had come. I had heard the beating of its wings and he had waved it away.

"Now for our crossword," I said briskly, and we raced through the puzzle, I as usual contributing about one to his six solutions.

"Now I shall read you to sleep," said Nurse Ryan in her most professional manner. Then temporarily Laura Ryan ousted Nurse Ryan.

"You didn't dream last night?" she hazarded, picking up *An Experiment in Time* from the floor where it had been thrown by the sudden collapse of his drawn-up knees when I came into the room.

"Yes I did, Nurse, I dreamt wisely—I dreamt of you. I think, I am almost sure—touching all the wood in the world—that you have exorcised that life-long nightmare. But," he added, the old look of strain contracting his brow, "I'll never be able to bear the sight of anyone with a limp. Never so long as I live!"

"If it does recur, I know a doctor," I heard my most professional voice say, "a suggestion-doctor who will prevent your ever having that silly dream again."

Far into the night I read aloud. My fears blurred, faded, dissolved; I began to deride them as morbid. The little room seemed so inviolable; he and I so safe, so alone in a sheltered,

unshared world. I watched his face gradually smooth into calmness until it began to wear almost that lovely busily-asleep look of a healthy child. Rejoicing in the utter tranquillity of his sleep, I watched over him. Lulled and soothed, I was almost dozing off myself when, to my disappointment, he began to turn and mutter. His head moved restlessly on the pillow and through the closed lids I could see the eyeballs stirring. Soon his face was all contorted, and inarticulate, protesting words broke through his twisted lips. I couldn't bear to watch him in such awful distress. Should I wake him from his so-called sleep? Surely no complete consciousness could be more exhausting? In such a mockery of sleep, there could not possibly be any real rest. The tossing grew more violent. Clearly the nightmare was approaching its climax.

Then came the awful cry that still rings in my ears.

"Mother! Mother!"

Reiterated, the word tore the air in agonized remonstrance. No appeal for help, for refuge, for comfort in the piteous cry of the primordial appeal connected with the name of Mother, but instead something that forever cancelled all one's natural associations with the word. Despairing protest, eternal repudiation were in that cry.

"Mother! Mother!"

For me the word remains irredeemably outraged.

I thought his own cry must wake him, but no. Seizing his shoulders, I had roughly to shake him out of his nightmare. Gradually, relief seeped through the deep-anguish in his eyes. His gratitude just because I had awakened him was the most pitiful thing I have ever seen. He begged me to read aloud, and

he did not go to sleep again. We made no further allusion to what the now dawned day held.

"See you tonight," I said as I left, just as on every previous morning; while I spoke my imagination overleaped all the intervening hours and pictured him, as I would next see him, stretched out and prone, his head swathed, his eager face expressionless, and myself watching over him through the slow drugged hours, with probably little to do but count his pulse and murmur reassurances as intermittently his mind rose to the surface of consciousness—rose and sank, sank and rose. There I should be, waiting for him on the brink.

I must have a good sleep, I told myself, store up as much vitality as possible so as to be able to give my uttermost. Tired as I was, to assure sleep I decided to go for a walk before I went to bed. But scarcely had I reached my bedroom when there was a knock on the door, and there in her nun-like white draperies, stood the matron, her remote, fateful face resolute. What was she saying? She was very sorry, but she must call on me for emergency work this morning. The theatre Sister was down with influenza and no other substitute could be found; so she was afraid I would have to take her place in the theatre this morning. Fortunately, there was only one operation fixed—the "head case," but that could not be postponed. The "head case?" Was that his indentivity to others? "I am sorry, Nurse," her even voice ended up, "I hate to put extra work on my night-staff, and you look tired. I'll get someone to relieve you tonight."

"Oh, no! Matron," the words rushed from my mouth, "that will be quite all right."

So then, after all I was to see it! I would be there!

Five minutes later I was in the theatre, busily attending to the sterilization of the instruments. They seemed to glitter with an entirely renewed significance. What had happened to all the dulling effect of slow familiarization? All gone. Quite, quite gone—lifted, like a thick film of mist. In my state of agonised hyperaesthesia my senses felt as though they had just been peeled. My mind reeled back to that first long ago operation at which I had so ignominiously fainted. All accustomedness deserted me. Even the familiar atmosphere of disinfectants regained all its original suggestive effect. I remembered how at first I used to think of it as the smell of pain and now again at every breath I felt sick and terrified.

Before long Cuthbert, white-coated and masked, was at my side to give his instructions to the theatre-Sister, and very surprised to find who she was.

Scarcely had I explained my presence when the enamel bowl, dropped from my hand, clanged on to the floor as my whole being clenched in the greatest effort of my life—the suppression of the scream which had already formed itself in my throat. The strain of checking the utterance of that scream made my temples almost burst. What I had seen drove all the blood from my heart.

A tall masked figure had *limped* into the room!

Mercifully, I too was masked, but I could hear my own panting breath, see the rapid rise and fall of my starched uniform. A few words to Cuthbert, and then—limp—limp—limp, the tall masked man moved off to wash his hands, each limp going through my heart like a spear of ice.

With clenched fists I watched the deliberate scrubbing and

rinsing; the devout slow wiping of the hands—the whole familiar ritual taking on an utterly new portentousness.

"Why does Steele limp?" I asked Cuthbert, struggling to keep my whisper even while I pretended to count the swabs. "Since when? Why?"

"Oh! Hadn't you heard? He injured his knee skiing last year, the very day after he won the championship. Rotten luck, but lucky it wasn't his arm."

Mechanically my hands went on with their accustomed tasks while my thoughts swirled in agonized indecision. Should I tell Cuthbert?—Try to make him intervene even now?—start gabbling about a mere dream in the sterilized reality of these surroundings?—profane that white temple of science by the intrusion of anything so utterly fantastic? Impossible! I should only be scurried off the premises, replaced by someone else. That priestess of a Matron! I could picture her outraged face, hear Cuthbert's shocked voice. Imperceptive though he is, I knew he had felt my agitation. I could see his eyes, (how impressively even the most commonplace, ordinary eyes shine through the slits in a mask!) searching my face. No, I must control myself, disregard the whole nightmarish affair, compel myself to remain just an alert, obedient mind and two deft hands. After all, the dream was never of any bodily harm to him.

("Is he cruel to you?")

"No, no! Far worse, I am cruel to him!")

The words flared vividly in my memory.

Ah, yes! but what was that he had said about dreams being *travesties*!

Pull yourself together. *Pull yourself together!* My lips almost

framed the words, for now I heard the well-known whisper of wheels moving on rubber tires. The little sacrificial procession filed into the theatre.

White and remote in deep unconsciousness, I saw him wheeled in. Custom had made me so impervious to anaesthetics. At first that uncanny suspension of life used to terrify me, but now I shivered at the sight of such deep insensibility. It was as though he had been let out on a long, frail rope, let far out on to the darkness of fathomless waters. Could it be safe to allow him so much rope? I wanted to haul him back from the unknown—back to the shores of consciousness. I could not bear to see him so near me and yet know him to be utterly out of my reach.

Though I screamed the ceiling down I could not reach his mind! Panic seized me, but what could I do?

Now they had lifted him on to the operating table. In spite of the closely shaven head and the shut eyes, how intensely individual that face, the only unmasked one there! The cleft chin, the horse-shoe scar, the bird's wing eyebrows. Normally I should have looked forward to seeing Steele's inspired hands at their work. Rivetted, I would have watched those long square-tipped fingers just as one might those of a supreme violinist. But today I would not look—not even at the preliminary incision.

The white-coated figures moved towards the operating-table. With averted eyes, I took my place.

As they closed around the operating table I heard a sharply in-drawn breath. Surely the sound had come from the tallest figure—from Steele himself? Why had he gasped? What had been the stifled word in that gasp? It sounded like *scar*. Had

anyone else heard him? Were my strained senses abnormally acute or were they playing me tricks? My resolution not to look at Steele's hands broke down. I gave one glance. God in Heaven! Was I going mad or were those long, lithe hands shaking? Could it be my own trembling that gave me this impression? Did anyone else see it? If so, he *must* be stopped! My ears sung, the bending figures blurred before my eyes. . . . Usually (how it had jarred on me when I was a novice, for in my innocence I had expected them to work in tense silence) surgeons and doctors would converse in perfectly every day tones throughout the whole of an operation. While their hands fashioned someone else's fate, they would chat of the latest "show," the test match, races, what-you-will.

But today surely the atmosphere was tensely strained? Steele himself scarcely spoke, seemed to answer at random and with only an abrupt "yes" or "no." My task of counting the swabs required all my concentration. Occasionally I glanced at Cuthbert, who stood with his hand on Lionel's wrist. I could feel him observing me, so to speak, counting my pulse as well as his patient's. In determination not to betray my agony I felt myself go all rigid.

And then it happened. And everyone realized it had happened. The imperturbable matron drew in her breath. The anaesthetist muttered; Cuthbert stifled an exclamation. Even the little junior nurse who stood at my elbow gave an audible gasp. My own averted eyes had seen nothing. Agonized, I could only surmise. A slip, a disastrous slip? There, amongst all those delicate tissues where the tenth of a hair's breadth of deviation could be irretrievable ruin! Yes, that petrified group had wit-

nessed some ghastly blunder. What had those celebrated hands done?

"Consequences? Consequences?" writhed my brain. What might they be?

"Someone else stitch up, please, I can't do it." A desperate voice jerked out the words and the tall, limping figure brushed past me, muttering something I could not for certain distinguish but it sounded like "You see it was *him*—" Certainly I heard the *him*! ("Someone else stitch up?" Yes, anyone could do that little job!) The door closed behind the limping figure. Part of my brain counted its swings, and after the last swing a muted jumble of consternation—exclamations and conjectures—reached my ears.

"Must have been ill—"

"Couldn't believe my own eyes!—"

"Hopeless, I should think," I heard Cuthbert's voice say.

"Can't tell for certain. By a miracle it might just have missed."

"Hopeless?" Spangled darkness rose and surged before my eyes, resolved into whirling wheels—crimson wheels that expanded and finally caught me up and spun me into black unconsciousness.

Almost the instant I came to, an icy wave of recollection broke over me. "Hopeless?" The brain? *His* brain! Paralysis, death or—or? No, *no*! Merciful Heaven, not *that*!

That first night, they tried to prevent me going to him, but, though there was nothing to be done that anyone else could not have done quite as well, I insisted on going. Through what seemed hundreds of slow hours I crouched in that familiar little room. There I waited and waited, with nothing to do but watch

—watch and pray—had I known how to pray. "Keep him well under all night," were my instructions. "Keep him under?" What, I wondered, exactly what might there be left to keep under?

The matron looked in and out. Cuthbert was there late at night, first thing in the morning. How shattered he looked! Not, I knew, really for the "case," at least only incidentally, but for the friend he adored—for Steele and his wonderful career. I could not bring myself to ask for which part of the brain they feared irretrievable damage. The motor-part? Paralysis partial or total? No. Several times the arms I had straightened to his sides had been flung over his head and the legs stirred continuously. Death? The pulse beat strong. Oh, God! Then it must be the mind! Through that agonising vigil I searched and searched his face. Had it already changed? How much expression usually remained during prolonged unconsciousness? A spreading sense of icy aloneness began to freeze my heart.

I suppose it was three days before I finally despaired and accepted the fact that all hope had been given up. I realized that that ardent face would never light up again, that the magnificent young body through which the senselessly strong heart would continue to pump the blood for another ten, twenty, thirty, forty years was nothing but a great empty case. Soon even that would be taken away. In the meantime I must go on tending that untenanted body as carefully, as unremittingly as though it still held him.

One day as I was flicking down the futile thermometer of the morning routine, Cuthbert (how much older he looked!) came in.

"He wants to see you," he said. "Can you come now?"

"Who wants to see me?" I asked from the infinite distance of desolation.

"Steele."

"Steele wants to see me? Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose he wants to ask you about that poor boy who, coming as he did straight from Australia, apparently has no relatives or friends here."

"I don't see any possible point in my seeing Steele," I said frozenly.

"My God! Laura, if he wants to see you, you must do what you can. Don't you realize what this means to him? He's thrown up all his appointments. Talks of going back to Australia and becoming a dispenser."

"Back to Australia?" I asked, with the sense that my question had been asked and answered aeons ago. "Did *he* come from Australia?"

"Yes, in very early infancy, but he's still got some relatives out there."

I went. I can still see every detail in the methodical room. The green leather armchairs, the complete medical library, the diagrams on the walls, the general purposeful orderliness of the whole setting, and the chaos in the devastated young face. Cavernous, twitching.

That alert young face. "Alert?" Yes. Lion's descriptive words returned to my mind—"It's a very distinctive face, an unforgettable face—frightfully alert and sensitive: exceptionally far-apart eyes, magnificent forehead, straight nose. In fact, he would be remarkably good-looking, if it wasn't that his ears stuck out so much." I also remembered how the very first time

I ever saw Steele, when he had come to lecture at the hospital where I was training, I had had that peculiar sense of recognition, almost as strongly as I had it at my first sight of Lion.

Could there be some unremembered connection between the three of us, something not in this dimension of life? My roving eyes took in the title of a book that lay face downwards on the floor. (I had heard it fall as we came in.)

It was *An Experiment in Time*.

During our brief interview, Cuthbert stood at my side with the sheepish look of the shy in the presence of intense mental suffering.

I felt Steele's glaring eyes rake my face.

"Has he suffered?" he jerked out. "No, how could he? I did my work too well!" (An awful little laugh.) "You had nursed him for some time, hadn't you? What was he like?"

"Oh, he was very nice," I answered—just as one might commend a cake.

"Was he happy?"

"I don't know. N-no. No, he was too nervous."

"Nervous, was he? In what sort of a way? Afraid of the operation?"

"Oh, no, not in the least, but he had—he had dreams."

"Oh, *he* dreamt too, poor fellow! did he?" asked Steele, and he gave that terrible laugh again.

Then he walked to the window, and stared out at the driving snow.

Turning sharply round, he questioned me again.

"He came from Australia, didn't he? Whereabouts in Australia? Have you any idea?"

"Yes, from Geelong."

"Geelong," he echoed. "Yes, that was where I came from."

("Not a short horse in Australia." As the words swam into my mind I very nearly spoke them aloud.)

"Do you know any of his family?" I asked with a sudden hunger to get into touch with anyone belonging to him.

"Not that I know of," he said with another laugh. "If I ever did, I could scarcely be expected to remember them. You see I was only two when I left Geelong, and I've never been back since."

A long pause. I felt Cuthbert's agony of embarrassment.

"Who brought you over, Steele?" he asked, just for the sake of breaking the silence. "Your parents?"

"My father died before I was born. I came over with my mother—or rather, what was left of her. It was her sister that brought us back. She, my mother, had had some ghastly shock just before I was born and it had affected her mind. Perhaps. . . ." (again the laugh) "that is my excuse for what I did last week. Some pre-natal injury to my nervous system always lying there unsuspected, biding its time, waiting for my appointed victim."

"Was it the shock of your father's death that affected your mother?" hazarded Cuthbert.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Steele, with the derisive emphasis with which one repudiates an explanation so inadequate as to be laughable.

The snow lashed at the window. I listened to it and to the crackling of the fire.

Another long pause broken by Cuthbert's rather shaky voice. "Have you made your plans?"

"Yes, I've made my plans," Steele answered resolutely. Then he turned to me once more. "Was he clever, Sister?" he asked.

"I don't know," I lied.

(Why tell of scholarships and of the reviews I had seen of his newly published first book?)

"Well, that's all then," he said, and I knew how desperately he wanted us to go. "I just wanted to ask what sort of a fellow he was. Anyway, thank God he didn't suffer! No," he went on as though speaking to himself, "he couldn't possibly have suffered. How could he? So perhaps *she* won't smile quite so widely."

"Who won't smile?" I heard myself scream.

A shutter came down in the ravaged face.

"I'm sorry. I was talking nonsense."

"But you *must* tell me what you meant!" I cried. "You *must!* You *must!*"

He shook his head, and then signalled silently to us to go.

With a start, Cuthbert reverted to the man-of-action.

"Come away, Laura," he said authoritatively and, drawing me aside, he whispered with his genius for over-simplification, "He doesn't know what he is saying. Poor boy! He is almost distraught!"

"Goodbye," said Steele, as we reached the door. He spoke quite normally now, but one was conscious of the exercise of immense self-control to keep himself on our plane. "Goodbye and thanks. Goodbye!"

I can still hear that last goodbye.

"I'll be back tomorrow," said Cuthbert as his car swept us away, "and see if I can't persuade him to come away with me for a few days."

How can anyone be so imperceptive? I wondered listlessly. Devoted as he is to his friend, how is it that he does not realize he should not be left alone, not for one second? But I felt no impulse to intervene. The brilliant young surgeon's career was ruined. Why should he, too, not escape from that smile?

Poor Cuthbert. I believe he was really quite as much surprised as shocked by the next morning's newspaper with its photograph of that unforgettable face and the huge headline: "Meteoric Career Cut Off By Tragic Suicide of Brilliant Young Surgeon."

I raised my eyes from the newspaper to that which turned and mumbled on the neat little bed. What could I do next? Take its temperature, feel its pulse, count its respirations?

As I busied myself with these futilities, the whole of existence seemed to leer at me with a slow, infinitely evil, female smile.

The Lovely Voice

I WONDER why it is that in my old age I should suddenly feel prompted to set down this experience of a far-off girlhood. Partly, perhaps, because of our last night's conversation concerning murder.

We argued so long as to whether there was necessarily anything exceptional about the character of a murderer, my grandson maintaining that murder, like other actions, was in most cases merely the result of circumstances, and no indication of the essential man.

"The act of murder," he asserted, "is far more of a fluke than many deeds not punishable by law. If you tell me that a man is habitually rude to his servants, or cruel to his dog, you give me considerable insight into his personality and character, but by merely informing me of the fact that he has committed murder you leave me in complete ignorance as to his nature."

I wonder. . . .

Long, long ago, when I was thirteen years old, for the sake

of acquiring both French and health, I passed a whole summer in a hotel in France. There is no object in giving the name of the place, a large town on the edge of a magnificent forest. My governess and I shared a double room, in which we did lessons as well as slept. An admirable woman, Mademoiselle Plage, but by no means an enthralling companion. By sheer force of will she succeeded in holding my attention during lesson hours, but for the remainder of the day she did nothing whatever to occupy my mind. Her conversation offered neither instruction nor amusement. But I was very far from being bored. At that age the mere fact of staying in a large hotel was sufficient entertainment. The glamour of "pricky" water (plain water was considered unsafe) never palled; the waiters were friendly, and it was lovely to be asked *which* sweet I would have. Above all, there was my unfailing interest in all the variety of visitors who perpetually came and went. Unlike us, they were mostly birds of swift passage, and nearly every time I came into the dining-room there would be some newcomer to stare at. I wonder how often Mademoiselle told me it was rude to stare. She wasted her breath. She might just as well have asked me to stop breathing, so enthralled was I by this succession of human beings—by their faces, their voices, their clothes, and their manners.

Towards the end of July the stream of visitors thinned, and all through the peculiarly sultry August the hotel was far too empty to please me.

I mention this and the fact of Mademoiselle's dullness to show that my mind was unoccupied and therefore all the more liable to receive a vivid impression. If I was not consciously hungry for distraction, I was at least especially susceptible to it.

One day towards the end of the month the heat was so intense that we were obliged to leave the door, as well as the windows of our room, wide open. I always found lessons particularly difficult in hot weather, and that morning was staring in sticky despair at the sum confronting me. Any distraction would have been welcome, and at the sound of approaching footsteps and the chatter of voices I pricked up my ears. Through the open door I saw the concierge, bowing and smiling, followed by two vividly dressed, rustling ladies. It was only a fleeting glimpse that I caught, but it was enough to give an impression of almost startling smartness, and even now I can still smell the strong whiff of sweet, exotic perfume that came with the new arrivals. Most children have a dislike of artificial scent, and I remember wrinkling my nose with repugnance.

"*Par ici,*" said the concierge, and I heard the silken dresses of the ladies swish into the room next to ours.

A peculiarly pleasant, fluting voice complained of the "*grande chaleur,*" and their door was left wide open, so that for the remaining half-hour of my lessons I could plainly hear the two foreign voices. I understood French as easily as English and, ignoring my arithmetic, I listened to their ceaseless conversation. It was real chatter, a bright babble of words punctuated by gay laughter.

The voice I had first distinguished—an enchanting voice—appeared to do practically all the talking. Certainly it initiated each topic. In marked contrast to its rippling vivacity, the other voice was rather toneless—a sort of flatness conveying the impression of a somewhat dull personality. Yet her animated friend seemed sufficiently satisfied with her company. They

talked of their journey, their clothes, their plans for the morrow. Scattered through the conversation I frequently heard "*Ma chérie*,"—occasionally "*Mon ange*," and other endearments.

The chambermaid, who brought our hot water, announced that two "*Parisiennes d'une grande élégance*" had arrived. Anxious to be in time to see the entry of the new arrivals, I hurried down-stairs to the dining-room.

They were late, but when they did appear my expectations were far from disappointed. A lovely slender young woman sailed—there is no other word for such effortless motion—into the room, followed by her equally well-dressed but otherwise unprepossessing companion. To my delight, they sat down at the next table to ours, and the exquisite one began to speak in the voice I had already thought so enchanting.

I was riveted by the beauty of this young Parisian. Not only was she utterly beautiful with a peculiarly dewy loveliness, but there was about her a flowing grace such as I had never seen equalled. She seemed to bask in her own beauty, of which she was inevitably and simply aware.

"What fun it all is! How lucky we are to be alive!" her glittering glance seemed to say even when it fell on the jaded, shabby waiter from whom she might have ordered so much nectar and ambrosia instead of merely gigôt and mineral water.

Even Mademoiselle, who was not addicted to personal remarks, actually sighed out the word "*Revissante*". The flower-like skin of the radiant young woman struck me as of a fairness amazingly in contrast to her dark hair, eyebrows and lashes. I have never seen such startling whiteness crowned by black hair. She shimmered.

Her companion was indeed an admirable foil, the one being

as opaque as the other was translucent. Probably she was still nearly as young as she had ever seemed, but in her slow, unventilated face and her flat, springless voice, there was something definitely dreary.

I wondered why two such utterly different women should be together, and concluded they must be related. The lovely woman's talk never flagged. Her voice was like running water with delicious sprays of laughter. If her companion contributed but little, she was at least a rapt and more appreciative listener. Evidently she doted on her brilliant friend. So testified the humble, adoring eyes and the delighted, unmusical chuckles with which she greeted her sallies.

After all these obliterating years, I can still hear the dancing voice to which she listened. Not only so sweet and liquid in tone, but of such dancing flexibility that its intonations seemed, as it were, to thread the intricate mazes of a minuet and to curtsy in wincing appreciation of what it told. Her conversation was of people, of books, of plays, of clothes, and, to a child inured in schoolroom routine, redolent of varied interest and amusement.

After luncheon we moved into what would now be called the lounge, and my governess pounced on a dreary newspaper.

To my delight, the two ladies soon came in. Catching sight of me, the lovely one's eyes lit up. "Hurrah! A child! Perhaps she'll be fun," they seemed to say.

Tall, undulating, smiling, she swayed across the room, and in a moment had joined us, and in charming broken English had begun to talk, not condescendingly as a grown-up person to a child, but rationally as to an equal.

I don't know how to convey to what extent I was fascinated.

Suffice it to say that I became a complete convert to the use of scent. Twining her arm round my waist, she drew me towards her friend, saying I must hear her repeating watch, which "loffly chimes played". The other woman obligingly showed me her pretty toy, and beneath her drab exterior and commonplace manners, child as I was, I could see the floor of her nature's steady kindliness shining like metal through muddy waters.

Reluctantly I was dragged away for my afternoon's walk and, to my great disappointment, the ladies did not appear in the lounge for tea. I was never allowed to come down to the evening meal, and at seven I was sent to bed. I went upstairs the victim of a raging cult. I was obsessed by the bewitching stranger.

The night was stifling—the hottest of all that grilling year—and it was considered necessary to leave our door wide open. Even so there seemed no air to breathe. I lay and panted in my bed, and when Mademoiselle joined me at about ten o'clock I was still wide awake. Her complaints of the heat soon subsided into audible slumber, but by now I had determined to stay awake until the ladies in the next room came upstairs.

I pined to hear that enchanting voice again, for it was her voice that had captivated me even more than her face.

It must have been long past eleven when at last the sultry silence was broken by the sound of fashionable high heels clicking on the parquet floor of the corridor and the fluting notes of the voice for which I so eagerly listened. I heard the lovely voice say in French the door must be kept open on account of the heat. I was delighted. I should be able to hear their talk.

Tonight there would be no slipping off to sleep from a dreary, lonely silence.

"It is so delicious to be here with you, *mon ange*," said the dull voice. She spoke, of course, in French, but I have forgotten her exact words. "With you one cannot have one dull moment," she went on, and I heard the sound of repeated kisses. I was struck by such demonstrative devotion.

"You are looking so ravishing," she continued, "but, oh, how I miss your glorious red-gold hair! How could you have spoilt it just for the sake of this one ball?"

"Oh, well," answered the voice, "Medea could not possibly have anything but black hair, could she? And wigs always look so unnatural. You can't get them right! Besides, the man who dyed it swears it will be quite itself again in three months."

"I admire your zeal," said her friend, "but I deplore the sacrifice."

It did, indeed, seem extraordinary zeal to dye your hair for a fancy-dress ball. With the natural Puritanism of childhood, only the day before such an idea would have disgusted me, but in my present state of infatuation it seemed only yet another symptom of her adorable zest for life. Excessive vitality mocks at a sense of proportion.

Besides, I rejoiced to hear my lovely lady's hair was naturally auburn—my favourite colour. Against the dazzling fairness of her complexion, the extreme darkness of her hair had seemed almost hard. Yes, a red-gold aureole would be far more becoming and greatly enhance her fairy-tale looks. I longed to see her as nature had designed her.

For several minutes the conversation ran on about the fancy-

dress ball—Who was going? and as what character? How much had this and that lady paid for her costume? and so on.

“What an extraordinary whim of Madame de Brun,” said the dull voice, “that she must need give a big charity ball just now when no one is naturally in Paris. But she never did do anything like anyone else.”

“No, and can you wonder?” said the voice, and here it dropped to inaudible whispering, followed by such loud laughter from both women that, to my annoyance, Mademoiselle woke up.

“I cannot stand such chatter!” she exclaimed angrily. “Even heat is preferable. Let us cook in silence and peace.”

She banged the door and my evening’s entertainment was at an end.

It had been such a treat listening to their talk, and now, alas! I could no longer distinguish their words, though, as the wall was thin, I could still hear the sound of ceaseless talk and frequent laughter. On and on it went. The first streaks of dawn were thinning the darkness before I fell asleep, but even then the ladies had not finished what my daughter—before they shingled—would have called their “hair-combing”.

Though you may be sure that I lingered as long as possible, they did not come down to breakfast while I was in the dining-room. Probably they had trays upstairs, but they must have gone out fairly early, for no sound came from their room during my boring lesson hours.

The day was distinctly cooler, and at half-past eleven we were able to start out for a walk.

During this long summer, my main hope of excitement lay in

desperate attempts to get lost in the huge forest on whose borders our hotel stood. This craving for adventure was never gratified. Mademoiselle's bump of locality was inconveniently well developed. Unerringly she could find the shortest way home. However, she was blessedly passive as to the direction in which we took our walks. In fact, she was completely indifferent where we went. Provided that I followed her home directly she pronounced it time, I was allowed to ramble at will through the more out-of-the-way and unfrequented paths of the magnificent forest.

This morning, when, after three-quarters of an hour's walk, we came to a sudden turning that disclosed a long vista new to me, to my delight I saw at some distance—I suppose about fifty yards off—two figures I immediately recognised as the two Parisian ladies, one of whom had occupied most of my thoughts during the walk. Surrounded by all the paraphernalia of an elaborate picnic, they were both leaning against the broad trunk of an oak tree whose spreading branches overshadowed the little footpath leading past it. Their sun-flecked dresses made gay splashes of colour against the heavy green of late summer.

My yesterday's interview with the lady of the lovely voice made me feel quite confident of a delightful welcome, and, with all the impetus of a bored child in sight of diversion, I ran towards them. I was disappointed. Not in the lady's beauty—she was dressed in dryad green and her complexion glowed in the brilliant sunshine—but in the expression of her face. Though she smiled quite civilly, her eyes showed no pleasure. Why? Yesterday they had literally shone with welcome.

I felt dashed. I had so much looked forward to the tonic of her gay responsiveness.

Oddly enough, it was her sallow friend who appeared most pleased to see me. A placid good-humour radiated from her plain face. She offered me chocolates, and her accomplished watch was again put through its tricks. By this time Mademoiselle had reached us. Characteristically she announced that it was time to go back for *déjeuner—tout de suite*.

"It is today so luffy," said the plain lady, "that we are going to—how you say?—peek-neek. I wish that you might join with us, but unhappily we have not enough proveesions."

The lovely lady, on whose face I had seen a fleeting frown, now beamed and agreed that it was a "big peety".

Reluctantly, I followed Mademoiselle's relentless back.

To eat cold chicken in one's fingers under that glorious tree and in such enchanting company would indeed have been a blessed break in the monotonous routine of my *tête-à-tête* with Mademoiselle.

Though her disappointing greeting had greatly disconcerted me, the fascination of the lady with the lovely voice was still so strong that when we set out for our afternoon walk I felt irresistably drawn back to the site of the picnic in the hope that the two friends might still linger in so pleasant a spot.

I had no difficulty in finding my way back. Outstripping Mademoiselle, I hurried, and when I turned the corner which brought the great oak into sight, I saw that the two ladies were still there. The tall figure in green had risen to her feet and, with her back towards me, was bending down over the other, who still leant against the tree.

I was so delighted to see them that, waving my hand, I

shouted a joyous "Hullo!" and darted forward. The tall green figure, dappled by sunshine, turned round suddenly and signalled to me to stop. At that distance I could, of course, not see the expression of her face, but there was no mistaking her almost violent gesture. She was waving me back, checking my approach, as might a nurse in charge of a sleeping child. Surprised, I stood stock still and stared.

The graceful, rippling green figure stooped low. Evidently she was kissing her friend. Again I was struck by such demonstrative affection. At least three kisses must have been given before she turned round and began to walk toward me. Half-way between me and the tree she looked back, and, waving her hand, called out, "*Au revoir, Chérie! Au revoir!*" To my surprise, there was no response from her friend, not even a nod of the head or a wave of the hand, as rather stiffly she reclined, propped up against the tree-trunk, her smart winged hat slightly tilted to one side, one hand holding up her somewhat garish parasol, the other lying in her lap beside a few wild flowers and one half of an orange. I remember noticing how almost exactly the orange matched the parasol, the top of which rested against the tree. Obviously she must have closed her eyes, otherwise I could not imagine her failing to return her friend's wave of the hand. Asleep she could not be; the elbow of the arm holding up the parasol was bent at too acute an angle. In fact, in her whole attitude there was nothing to suggest sleep.

But I had scarcely had time to know that I had noticed any of these details before the lady with the lovely voice reached me and Mademoiselle, who had just joined me. She looked flushed, and spoke quickly.

"My friend is feeling the heat," she said. "So she stays there to repose herself. For myself, I go back to the hotel to pay the bill and fetch our baggage, and will pick her up. The road comes not so very far off, I know, for we drove out this morning, and only valked perhaps a quarter of an hour. I did not want you to come close just now because my poor friend is so nervous when she the *migraine* has. Absolute quiet is for her then necessary. It will no doubt be the sun of yesterday that her ill has made."

I paid little heed to her account of her friend's indisposition. The mention of luggage and paying the bill had quenched my spirits. So they were to leave today! Somehow I had assumed that they would make a long stay, and I felt dismally dejected. Probably I should never see her again!

Tears of disappointment came into my eyes, but they were not noticed. Mademoiselle's corns were worrying her, and the lady seemed agitated about her friend's *migraine*.

"Now, little one," she said, still speaking very quickly, and in a voice that was not quite the one I loved, "please show me the quickest way back to the hotel. The sooner I get the tabloids my friend always takes, the better."

Glad to be of any use, I took her at her word and started off at a rapid pace. Our short cut involved following paths scarcely worthy of the name.

She was as fleet of foot as myself, and poor Mademoiselle toiled in our wake.

About half-way home I received a shock that greatly troubled me. As I have said, I chose some very unorthodox paths, and, while I was threading my way along one, across which the

overspreading branches were scarcely cleared, forgetting how closely I was followed, I carelessly allowed a branch I had pushed to one side to swing back. I heard a sharp cry of annoyance. The released branch had caught the lady's hat, almost knocking it off her head. In a flash she had adroitly righted it, but not before I had seen the jet-black hair under the displaced hat surprisingly shift to one side, as it did so revealing some two inches of *red* hair!

I'm not sure whether she saw that I had seen, but she looked flushed and disconcerted, and it was in complete silence that we finished our helter-skelter walk to the hotel.

I don't quite know why I was so disquieted by my chance discovery, but somehow I felt a sudden sagging of my natural trustfulness. Whether straightforward or not themselves, I think most children attach great importance to truthfulness in those they love. It may seem absurd to use the word "love" in connection with a stranger, but no other word describes the emotion this lady had inspired in me.

Why, oh why, in that conversation to which I had so eagerly listened last night had she taken the trouble to tell her friend that she had had her red hair *died*? "Wigs always look so unnatural. You can't get them right." I remembered her very words.

I expostulated with myself. How she achieved a desired disguise was surely a trivial matter, and no doubt there was some quite simple explanation. Perhaps she intended to surprise her friend by appearing in her natural colouring that very evening? A sort of practical joke? Nevertheless, I could not quite banish her distress from my mind. Her annoyance over that branch,

too, seemed out of all proportion to the mishap of a displaced hat.

One way and another I felt disillusioned.

On our arrival I heard her ask for her luggage to be brought down, and order a carriage.

Dejectedly I went to my room. Not very long afterwards, hearing the clatter of horses' hoofs, I leant out of the window. A carriage driven by a fat man with a black patch over one eye had drawn up at the door. Elegant luggage was piled on behind and my lady, now dressed in a plain beige coat and a small blue hat, stepped into the carriage. As the fat man with the black patch cracked his whip, she glanced upwards, and, seeing me, kissed her hand and smiled with all the radiance that enslaved me. My damped devotion flared up. Let her wear as many wigs as she chose and make any sort of fool of her dull friend, what cared I? I would remain her devoted slave. But, alas! should I ever see her again?

The rattling carriage had now disappeared. She was gone. . . .

Lessons had never seemed so pointless, nor Mademoiselle so dreary. At tea-time she discovered that a hole in her pocket had led to the loss of her purse. In high agitation she announced that we must retrace our footsteps in the hope of finding the lost property.

Indifferent, I acquiesced. To me, all paths in that vast and pointlessly beautiful forest were now equally uninteresting. It was already quite four hours since the lady's departure. No doubt she was already long since in Paris, the centre of all the brilliance and gaiety her personality suggested.

I tried to concentrate on the diligent search for the lost purse.

Mademoiselle promised me a half-holiday as a reward if I should find it, but I had no particular use for a half-holiday. With bent heads, progressing at a snail's pace, the walk seemed endless, and it was not until we were within ten yards of the corner leading to the ladies' picnicking place that, with a cry of joy, Mademoiselle descried her purse lying, where it had fallen, right in the middle of the path. Her anxiety thus relieved, she became excruciatingly conscious of the corns to which, as she constantly complained, she was an "absolute martyr".

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "my feet burn! I will take my boots off and give them a few minutes' rest."

I told her I would stroll on and turn back in two minutes. In my dejected state, movement was at least preferable to standing still. A few listless strides brought me to the turning. The familiar oak-tree came in sight, and I stopped dead and stared in amazement. I literally rubbed my eyes, for the scene was not the empty one I had expected. There, in full view, her back propped against the broad oak, her bent arm supporting the garish parasol, still reclined the figure of her whom I had come to think of as "the other lady." The flowers and the one half of an orange still lay in her lap, the disengaged hand beside them.

She was in exactly the same position as when I had last seen her! How extraordinary! I remembered the lovely lady's obvious anxiety to catch the next train. Had she, then, failed to find her friend? Was she perhaps still vainly searching through the forest? She might be quite close. Possibly I should see her again. But fancy her friend having slept on all these hours. Slept she must have, else why was she still in the same position? It *was*

precisely the same position. I remembered noticing the acute angle at which the elbow of the arm holding up the parasol was bent.

Surely it was a queerly stiff position for a sleeper. And what a long sleep! Mademoiselle and I had walked so slowly while searching for the purse. Why, it must be quite six hours since I last saw her.

I now noticed with surprise that she was bareheaded; and where was the small, smart, winged hat? Nowhere in sight.

As I stared at the still figure, I felt a strange drumming in my ears, and my breath came fast and rather painfully because of the queer way in which my heart was thumping.

My thoughts scarcely shaped the misgivings that assailed me. All I knew then was that not for anything in the world would I have approached one step nearer to that stiff, propped figure flecked by the slanting shafts of the evening sun.

An undefined dread of my own half-formed thoughts seized me. Horror hovered—but no! no! no! I shut it out.

My one imperative instinct was that on no account must Mademoiselle see what I had seen.

As quickly as possible I must get back to the hotel. Yes, that was the thing to do—get back. No doubt at the hotel I should find some quite simple explanation. Things would turn out to be all right, wouldn't they? Surely, surely? Anyhow, I wanted to move as quickly as possible—away and away and away from that sickeningly still figure. I couldn't bear to let Mademoiselle see my face. Muttering that I was fearfully thirsty, I passed her just as she was rebuttoning her boots. Feebly expostulating at my headlong pace, she followed.

Silently I plunged on and, in spite of her corns, the devoted woman managed for some time to keep close behind.

My thoughts were whirling, and for the last quarter of a mile I ran, reaching the hotel quite five minutes before Mademoiselle.

Just as I entered the courtyard, I heard the clop, clop of horses' hoofs, and a fiacre, driven by a fat man with a patch across one eye, rattled over the cobblestones.

Except for some luggage on the back seat, the fiacre was empty.

Flinging the reins onto the horses' backs, the driver jumped down from the box and clumped into the hotel. I followed him to the office, where, in his illiterate French and with much shrugging and gesticulating, he delivered himself of his strange story. "The dark lady from here," with the luggage, had told him to drive to a certain cross-ways in the forest. There she had got out, saying she went to fetch a friend whom she had left not far from the carriage drive, that she would return in at most ten minutes, and then they would proceed to the station. He told how he had waited and waited, at first with patience, and then without patience. For five hours he had been without food or drink, but the lady had never returned. He had not dared to leave his horses and go and search the foot-paths. He had shouted and shouted, but no answer had come. What was he to do now? he asked himself, and how about his fare and his wasted day? He did not care for such customers! No, thank you!

The hotel staff volubly expressed their astonishment, but I did not stay to hear anything further. I rushed upstairs and, to gain time, locked myself up in the bathroom.

I could not face Mademoiselle, and yet I could not bear to be alone with my thoughts. Could the lady with the lovely voice have failed to find the way to her friend? It was possible. But then, surely she could have managed to get back to her carriage? It was scarcely conceivable that anyone could miss the broad carriage drive. Perhaps she was ill, as well as her friend? Perhaps they had both been poisoned?

I pleaded a headache and went early to bed. Mademoiselle ordered her evening meal on a tray, and did not go down again; so she heard no hotel gossip. The maid who brought up the dinner might have said something, but, seeing me lying with closed eyes, she did not speak. By keeping my eyes tightly shut I avoided all conversation with Mademoiselle, merely giving an inaudible grunt when she said, "Thank goodness that at least we have peace tonight, now that the two ladies with their ceaseless chatter are happily gone."

Peace tonight? My ears could still hear their "chatter", just as clearly as last night. Their chatter? Yes, their chatter and their kisses. . . .

It is impossible to describe the following days and how my crumbling confidence was gradually seeped through by an infiltrating flood of horror. It is difficult to distinguish what I thought at the time from what I now think that I must have thought. A genuine headache and a subconscious shrinking from further news kept me long in bed the next morning. When at last I was stealing apprehensively down the stairs, I saw two gendarmes in the hall. They were surrounded by the entire staff of the hotel. Many voices were talking all at once in shrill excitement, and there was a general impression of agitated

emotion. When I had nearly reached the lowest step, Mademoiselle, her face white and strained, detached herself from the gesticulating group and rushed toward me. Saying that I looked dreadfully ill, she scuffled me back to my bedroom and kept me there all day.

Early the next morning we left the hotel. I was given no explanation of our hurried departure, and was consistently treated like a very young child. To what extent this conspiracy of silence augmented my sufferings, it is impossible to convey. If anyone had frankly talked to me of the mystery that obsessed me, I am sure my nightmare sufferings would have been less agonizing and less enduring.

But all my questionings of Mademoiselle—in fact, any mention of the two Parisian ladies—were only answered by "*Tais-toi.*"

I began to feel as though I myself had committed a crime, so haunted was I both when awake and when dreaming. In my dreams everyone had red hair and a kiss was death. And always before my eyes was that stiff propped-up figure—so gaily dressed—so shockingly still. "*Au revoir, Chérie. Au revoir.*"

By bribing housemaids to procure me newspapers, and cross-questioning everyone I saw as often as I managed to evade Mademoiselle's vigilance, I gradually pieced together the melodrama that had for some time caused the hotel to be the most talked of in Europe. I will repeat the story, not in the sequence in which it filtered through to my knowledge, but as the events succeeded one another.

On the evening of the indignant coachman's return to our hotel, a woodcutter walking home from his work in the forest

noticed a smartly-dressed but hatless lady leaning up against a tree. It was after sunset, and it struck him as a little odd that she should be holding up a parasol. This next morning as he walked to his work by the same path, he was amazed to see the same figure in precisely the same position. His suspicions aroused, he approached, and discovered that the woman was dead. He immediately informed the police. The coachman's story of his missing fare told them which hotel to apply to, and before noon the sensation had spread like wildfire, and every servant in the hotel was basking in the blaze of publicity.

The inquest revealed that the murdered woman had been drugged by means of an orange, one half of which lay uneaten on her lap, and then pierced through the left temple, probably by a hatpin.

The initials on the dead lady's handkerchief and underclothes did not correspond with either of the names under which the two Parisians were registered in the hotel book.

It was remembered that the other lady had entered both their names.

The luggage left behind bore no name; it was merely labelled to one of the chief Paris stations and its contents held no clue as to identity. No trace could be found at the station of a dark-haired lady in a beige coat and a small blue hat.

Months afterwards, by the merest chance, a black wig, a small blue hat, and a beige coat were found flung away in a very dense, pathless part of the forest.

Even though seven hundred people had taken travelling tickets on the day of the murder, the man who issued them might well have remembered a strikingly beautiful *red*-haired

woman, in a smart winged hat, but for such a woman no enquiries were ever made. Under cross-examination he claimed to recall about twenty beautiful ladies with black hair and eyebrows.

Neither had the porters noticed any *dark* woman travelling without luggage.

Whatever my dreams, no mention of "red hair" escaped my lips. For years afterwards I could scarcely hear those two words without a start. It became a real complex.

When she left the carriage, no doubt the lovely lady walked straight to the crowded station and left by the first train. No, not straight. She must first have taken the winged hat off her dead friend's head. She could not travel in the little blue one in which she had been seen leaving the hotel.

A photograph of the dead woman was circulated. This and her initials soon led to her identification.

To me this identification was a second shock, the effects of which I can scarcely describe.

At that "schwärmerish" age, my imagination had been entirely captured by a young poet of remarkable personal beauty, whose precocious and peculiar genius had newly taken the reading world by storm. I will give him the pseudonym of Leon le Roi. His moonlit muse was not destined to survive the daylight of posterity. He is now long since forgotten. But at that time he had subjugated both critic and schoolgirl and his romantic features were as familiar to an adoring public as are now those of the most popular of film stars. I myself cherished no less than three photographs of him, and my memory was packed with his sonnets laboriously committed to memory. It

had never occurred to me to speculate as to his personal life. To me he was a radiant emanation rather than a fellow-creature—a "pard-like spirit, beautiful and swift," not a Frenchman who ate luncheons, wore hats, and must be either a married man or a bachelor. Imagine my feeling when it was established beyond doubt that the poor murdered woman in the forest had been his wife! That sallow, commonplace creature the chosen of Léon le Roi! And he, my imagination's idol, now in the blinding limelight of this hideous melodrama!

No sort of an explanation was ever advanced, no shadow of a motive discovered. The poet had been away from his house in Paris on a visit to his mother in some remote province. When he returned, his servants told him his wife had gone away for a day or two, leaving a letter. In giving his evidence, he said this letter informed him she had gone away for a change of air and would be back at latest on the day of his return. She gave the name of her destination, but not of the hotel, on which she said she would decide on arrival. He denied any knowledge as to whom her companion might have been, and insisted that she had made no mention of taking anyone with her.

When asked to produce the letter that told of his wife's plans, he expressed his regret at having destroyed it before he heard the terrible news. He professed himself quite unable to recall any friend of his wife who answered to the description given by the witnesses from the hotel. None of her very few intimate associates happened to have dark hair. She had left home and driven to the station alone.

L'Affaire de la Forêt, as it was called, became one of the most sensational of undetected crimes.

Detectives were then perhaps less redoubtable than they have since become. In any case, the mystery remained unsolved. No arrest was ever made. Another murderer went unpunished by man.

Gradually the feverish interest subsided, and *l'Affaire de la Forêt* became a thing of the past.

Needless to say, every aspect of the tragedy remained vividly impressed on my mind. I was still haunted by the vanished lady. I could hear her enchanting voice, see her shimmering beauty, recall her radiant gaiety.

I could also see that sickeningly still figure stiffly propped against the tree. . . . "Au revoir, Chérie. Au revoir."

Gradually my impressions might have faded, but this was not to be.

My haunting experience had a sequel. The effect on me of that sequel I leave to the reader's imagination. One summer's day, about two years after these events, I was strolling through the Bois de Boulogne. Passing a bench on which a woman was seated, reading aloud, I was violently struck by the quality of her voice. Could there possibly be two such voices? My heart wildly beating, I turned and stared at the reader. I saw a young woman of dazzling fairness. Her discarded hat lay on her lap, and the sun, stealing through the network of leaves, lit up the red-gold glory of her hair. Of her radiant loveliness there could be no question. If she had a fault, her eyebrows and lashes were perhaps too pale, but even this added something to the ethereal quality of her fairy-tale looks.

At her feet, his hands clasped round his knees, sat a young man, his dark head thrown back as he gazed up at her.

His beautiful face was as familiar to me as my own.

It was the famous poet, Léon le Roi!

Almost startled out of my reason, I could scarcely repress a cry, but I hurried past. In my first confusion I was only conscious of one impulse—to get out of sight in case *she* should cease reading and look up and see me and the expression on my face.

She might recognize me.

I do not know what other girls might have done. I only know that to take any steps in this bewildering matter never for one second crossed my mind. God knows I was sufficiently troubled, but not by any questioning as to my own responsibility. That never occurred to me. . . .

As one gets older, one often asks: "Is it all worth while? Is life and its *potential* happiness worth its inevitable suffering? Does humanity ever receive in bliss a tithe of what it pays for in pain? Even apart from the question of opportunity, is man's capacity for joy equal to his capacity for suffering?" One or two recollections make me answer, "Yes, it *is* worth while." Amongst all evidences of human bliss witnessed by me, the most eloquent was the expression I can still see in that poet's eyes as he gazed on the face of that woman.

Come what might, to him life must be accounted worth while. For him the game *was* worth the candle. Never shall I forget the look on his face. Rapture and peace so seldom meet. . . .

There is only one thing more to tell. Shortly after I saw that blissful pair in the Bois de Boulogne, my mother and I visited friends in Paris.

The blood rushed to my face as I heard the hostess, who was pouring out tea, say to my mother, "Fancy, yesterday I met

poor Léon le Roi's new wife. She's the most lovely creature."

"Yes," said my hostess's sister. "I remember seeing her once before. She made a great sensation when she appeared as Medea at Madame de Brun's fancy-dress ball. I remember people said it was incorrect for Medea to have red hair, but I thought her so right not to sacrificè her own wonderful colouring."

The next day in my doctor's waiting-room I came across some very far back numbers of a society paper. One of them contained an account of Madame de Brun's Fancy Dress Ball two years before. I looked at the date. The ball had taken place on August 31st, the evening of the very day after the one on which Léon le Roi's first wife had been murdered.

The First Night

LISTLESSLY she was taking off her make-up. Tears diluted the face-cream as she rubbed it into her face.

The dress-rehearsal was over and she was in despair. Her great chance had come—the lead in what she thought the finest play ever written. Her adored Clive was producing it, and only yesterday he had told her he loved her. Everything should have been perfect. Instead, the air was heavy with the awful sense of impending failure. Exasperated, utterly disheartened, she could no longer struggle against the sense of hopelessness.

Clive, his eyes strained, his face drawn, came in to ask if she was ready to be driven home. Seeing her tears, he kissed her but made no attempt at reassurance.

"Yes, my sweet, we're in for a failure," he said in as jaunty a voice as he could achieve. "Disappointment of my career. At last the chance to produce a play of genius!" He shrugged his shoulders. "It's no use trying to disbelieve in luck, and of course I was dead against this theatre. There's a blight on it!

Failure after failure, and some of them damned good plays. Oddly enough," he went on in that funny, clipped voice she loved, "it was in this very theatre that this ill-fated play was nearly produced soon after it was written about twenty years ago."

Sylvia asked what had prevented it. He said the play had had to be postponed because the irreplaceable leading-lady fell ill and, before she recovered, the man who was backing it died; so the whole project collapsed and no one else had ever had the enterprise to put it on. One of the greatest blots on our theatrical escutcheon, he pronounced it.

"I can't bear to think of the wretched, frustrated author," he sighed. "Ten years of tantalisation, and sickening disappointments before his early death."

"You never told me the poor man actually died in this theatre," said Sylvia.

"Who told you that?"

"My old dresser, who seems once for all to have lost her heart to him. She was here when it happened. Why didn't you tell me, Clive?"

"Well, it didn't strike me as a particularly bracing piece of intelligence."

"What did he die of, Clive? Disappointment, I suppose?"

"Medically speaking, he died of hemorrhage of the lung," answered the producer. "And yet there's a good deal in your diagnosis. Frustration and growing despair can lower resistance to tuberculosis as well as to everything else. Can you imagine the disappointment, the *bitter* disappointment? Because you see, he knew how good his play was."

“Did you ever meet him, Clive?”

“No, but I once saw him act—a thrilling experience. He was to have played the lead in his own play. He would have been marvellous.

This gave Sylvia her clue to deplore the wretchedly inadequate actor the blasted management had insisted on engaging. There might be a spell on the theatre, but, heaven knows, none was needed! Felix Wing was enough to blight any play. He was hopeless! Not only a rotten actor—nothing but his looks to commend him—but so fatally stultifying to others. Really she could *not* act with him! He let her down all the time, made her feel like—like a match with nothing to strike against!

“Damned Philistine,” agreed Clive. “He can’t even see how good the play is—says it’s his idea of Christmas fare!”

Their outburst was a relief to both producer and actress and they went on capping one another’s abuse.

Wrapping her up against the icy air, Clive hurried Sylvia into his car. What a night! Ravening wind; swirling snow.

Five minutes later they were crouching over the electric fire in her little flat. Then, with hands stiff with cold, she made coffee, all the while still violently inveighing against the actor. He didn’t even know his part, she complained. Why, tonight he had missed out her most crucial cue and spouted quite a different line. Hadn’t Clive noticed? Of course Clive had noticed, but the queer thing was that the interpolated line, or something very like it, *was* in a revised typescript of the play someone had sent him after the parts had been given out, and he couldn’t think where Felix could have seen it.

The hot coffee revived them and, looking into each other’s

eyes, for a few blissful seconds they forgot the ill-fated play but, insisting that she must have a long rest, he soon tore himself away, leaving her to a night of nervous dread.

The morning brought no cheer. A bitter east wind blew; and, during the night it had first thawed and then again frozen, with the result that it was terribly dangerous underfoot. So encouraging to theatre-goers! However, the fewer the better, she told herself ruefully.

Somehow the long, slow day dragged by and at last, with the sense of a bad dream from which there could be no awakening, cold and sick, she faced her agonized reflection in the mirror of her dressing-room at the theatre. Her hands shook. If she weren't careful she would make an awful mess of her face.

Needle and thread in mouth, the kindly, fussy old dresser hovered in the background, busily pinning ironical first-night good-wish telegrams to the screen. She pressed a nip of brandy on her charge. "Nothing like it, Dearie, to put spunk into you."

Long before Sylvia was due to be called; everything that make-up could do was done. Despondently polishing her nails, she found herself watching the hands of the clock. Through the half-open door—the room was stifling—she became aware of rising tension; scurrying footsteps and agitated whispers suggested a crisis. Yes, obviously something was wrong. What was being kept from her? She sent the old lady out to reconnoitre. Waddling back into the room, she at first tried to put Sylvia off but, cross-examined, divulged that Felix Wing had not yet appeared. His dresser was distraught. In a quarter of an hour he was due to go on.

Almost, Sylvia began to hope for a reprieve. Might the play be postponed? No, of course the understudy would have to take over, and he was a hopeless stick. No escape. She must go through with it.

A bell. Running footsteps. "Beginners, please," came the call. Numbness gave place to a strange cold tingling. How would the understudy manage?

Then in bustled the old dresser with the news that the whole thing had been a false alarm. She didn't know what the explanation was, but probably Mr. Wing—he must have dressed at home—had been somewhere in the theatre all the time. Anyway, he had been found near the stage, all ready for his first entry.

Two minutes later Sylvia's own call came. Faint and dizzy, she made her way across the back of the stage to take up her position. Just before she reached it she heard an outburst of unusually prolonged clapping.

Waiting in the wings for her entry cue, she could see the performers! Profile towards her, Felix was in the middle of his "big scene" with his mother. What an astounding transformation! His wig and beard had not come in time for the dress-rehearsal; so she had never seen him made-up for the part. Fancy a wig and beard making all that difference! He looked strangely arresting. Extraordinarily attractive, too, in a rather baleful way. And how surprisingly well his voice sounded, strong and flexible! However incredible, the despised actor was giving an admirable performance. And how intent the house was! No fidgeting, not a whisper, not a single cough to be heard. Yes, a tautly attentive audience, and it was Felix who held it.

The moment Sylvia stepped on to the stage, with a thrill of

elation she knew that everything was going to be all right. The mother had just made her exit, and now for eight minutes of tense dialogue the two leading players would have the stage to themselves. From the first exchange of words she realized Felix had taken command. She was conscious of a complete and wholly unresented surrender of her own volition. It was like willingly letting go—yielding yourself up to the mastery of a supreme dancing-partner. How extraordinary to find yourself impelled, literally carried through your part, by the actor you had thought so contemptible. Why had he never shown his form but kept all this astonishing force, judgment and technique in reserve?

Never before on the stage had she felt this sense of utter confidence—confidence in the play, in her collaborator, in herself and in the audience.

When at the end of the first act the curtain fell, the applause was terrific, quite equal to anything Sylvia had ever heard at the finish of a play. Their names were even shouted. There was a movement to raise the curtain. "No calls to be taken before the final curtain," shouted Clive. Meanwhile, Felix had slipped away. Elated, full of happy anticipation, Sylvia was sure he would come to her dressing-room for mutual congratulations but, to her surprise, he did not appear. As the interval passed, she was conscious of growing disappointment and pique. Only five minutes more now. Ah! approaching footsteps—quick, nearing footsteps. He was coming!

In burst a radiant Clive. "An absolute triumph!" he cried, his eyes shining. "You're perfect, and fancy Felix keeping all that up his sleeve! But what's the matter, darling?"

Oh dear! Then her face had shown what she was dismayed to

find she felt—bitter, flattening disappointment that it was he, not Felix who had come. How awful! Clive's praise no longer meant anything to her. It was the other man's praise she hungered for. What had come over her? How could such a thing have happened in less than half an hour? Forcing a smile, she pleaded fatigue.

Five minutes later she stepped on to the stage without a qualm. The atmosphere crackled. Soon she knew she was giving the best performance of her whole career. She also knew and without the slightest pang that it was not on account of her, but of him, that, breathlessly intent, hundreds of people craned forward in their seats. The instant he left the stage she felt a slackening of tension. It was no longer concert-pitch. Her own scene with the mother, a scene she had thought so "strong," seemed little more than an interlude—almost padding.

Once more he and she were alone together on the stage. Now they were about to embark on their great love scene. With dismay and a qualm of shame, she realized that she longed eagerly for the moment when he must take her in his arms. Little shivers ran up and down her body.

As yet they had not so much as touched one another.

But when for the first time their hands met she almost screamed from the shock. The cold of that contact was so indescribable! Surely he must be ill? Her eyes should have been gazing up into his, but she could not help looking down to see what sort of colour such icy flesh could be. Another shock! How extraordinary that she should never have noticed that the top joint of the third finger of his right hand was missing. She couldn't bear the thought of his being hurt, impaired. Distressed out of all proportion, she found that she could not take her mind off his

poor damaged hand. How had it happened? Why hadn't she been there to comfort him?

But she must—must control her thoughts or she would lose hold of her part. In a second she must speak. What was he saying now? Not what she expected to hear. No, it was that interpolated line again. He had missed out her cue! Confused, she began to be afraid she would not know where in her part to take up her lines. For a terrible split second she was threatened with a total black-out; then, as though someone else were using it, she heard her own voice say several things that were not in the part she had learned. It was as though they had been silently communicated to her—remarkably telling lines. Now the scene was rising to its climax. She was playing her part superbly but, really, she felt scarcely more responsible than a ventriloquist's doll. And, though all the while she ached for his touch, every time their hands actually met, she had to repress a scream because of the unbelievably terrifying coldness.

Now they were no longer alone. Soon the whole cast surrounded them. Like musicians inspired by a marvellous conductor, all were acting far above their own form. There were even several very successful, unrehearsed effects.

For a few seconds after the play ended, there was a tense pause before the storm of thunderous applause broke. On and on it went, augmenting in volume. After the curtain had several times been raised on the company in full force, the performers came on in succession, first in fours, and then in pairs. At last all the others had taken their calls, and, simultaneously longing and shrinking from the touch of that icy hand, Sylvia stood waiting for him to lead her forward for the climax of the ovation. But where was he? Nowhere to be seen! Why had he

slipped away? A long, anxious wait. He did not come. Clive darted off in search but soon returned shaking his head. Peremptorily he signalled to the dejected Sylvia to go on alone. Bitterly hurt, forlorn, she swayed forward deprecatingly to face the clamouring audience all by herself. The applause was generous, but all the shouts were for his name. Yet he never came. Protesting, shrinking, she was forced to take call after call. Humiliating it was! Still no sign or word of him. At one moment it looked as though the baffled devotees would storm the stage. "Felix Wing!" "Felix Wing!" they called. At last Sylvia, now on the point of tears, absolutely refused to go on again, and for the last time the curtains rushed together. Even then the disappointed audience still kept it up, but gradually even the most tenacious applauders desisted and the house slowly emptied.

Dazed, Sylvia moved back to her dressing-room. Radiant, exuberant, Clive awaited her with outstretched arms. She shrank back from his embrace. In a white glare of self-discernment she knew he no longer concerned her. No, she would not mind if he were dead!

"Where is he?" she gasped, averting her face.

"Felix? Can't be found. Queer fellow. Must have bolted home. Damned rude. But there's nothing I couldn't forgive him now. Several distinguished first-nighters queueing up to see you, darling. Ready for the fray?"

"Give me five minutes," pleaded Sylvia.

"Right, I'll tell them. Back in a minute."

Back in a minute? She had hoped for five minutes respite. But after all, what could five minutes do? She dismissed the gushing dresser.

In a flash Clive was with her again, boringly enthusing about her performance and his love.

A knock on the door. What a relief! She heard an unknown name announced: "Dr. Graham."

"Mr. Lane?" said the stranger, with a shy inclusive bow. "I wanted to see you myself. Mr. Wing was most anxious I should. He's only just recovered consciousness. Nasty accident."

"Accident?"

"Yes, slipped on a bit of ice. Broken leg and concussion. He'll be quite all right, but of course he's in a terrible state about to-night. Unfortunately, there was no means of identification on him, so I couldn't let you know before."

"Let me know before? But you haven't been long about it," said Clive.

The doctor glanced at his watch.

"Well, it's three hours."

"*What?*"

"Yes, it happened when he was hurrying to get here. Fortunately I saw him fall and drove him straight to the hospital. As soon as he came around, he was frantic about having to let you down. Never seen a man in such a state."

"But then who . . .?" stammered Sylvia in wild surmise.

"What *are* you talking about?" Clive shouted.

"I hope the understudy managed all right," said the doctor, surprised by his manner. "I say, aren't you feeling well, Miss Strayte?"

No answer. She stood rigid. Recovering from his surprise, Clive assured the doctor his patient must either be mad or an imposter. Felix Wing had been here all the time and given a

marvellous performance. Dr. Graham was astonished. He said the injured man had been most convincing. But of course, one knew of such cases. No doubt someone had told the queer creature of his remarkable resemblance to the actor.

Accepting a cigarette from Clive, the doctor told them that oddly enough he himself should have been in the audience. The celebrated surgeon, Sir Leonard Holme, he said, had invited him. He was terribly sorry to have missed the play.

Just then the door opened and the privileged few invited by Clive to "come behind" were shown in. Foremost amongst them was Sir Leonard Holme.

After congratulating Sylvia, the distinguished-looking old man told Dr. Graham how sorry he had been to get his telephone message, and how ashamed, he added with a bow to Clive, to be responsible for an empty stall on so great an occasion.

"Dreadful pity you missed it, Graham," he said, turning to the young doctor. "Terrific play! I was the reverse of disappointed and yet I've never before so much wanted to see a particular play."

"Why did you want to see it so much?" asked Clive, interested.

"Because the poor fellow who wrote it made such an unforgettable impression on me."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes, patient of mine—I operated on him. He had had his finger crushed in a munitions factory and I had to take off the top joint."

Dr. Graham was just in time to catch Sylvia as she fell.

The Follower

MRS. MEADE, referred to by the nurses as "our heart-case," had been in the nursing home with heart trouble for three weeks, and her doctor, to whom she had confided the terror that obsessed her, had at last persuaded her to consult the famous psychoanalyst, Dr. Stone. She awaited his visit in great trepidation. It would not be easy to tell him of her fantastic experiences—"hallucinations," her own doctor insisted on calling them.

A quarter of an hour before the time when she expected Dr. Stone, there was a knock on the door.

"I'm a little early, Mrs. Meade," said a smoothly modulated voice from behind the screen, "and," it went on with a little deprecating laugh, "I must ask you to forgive my fancy dress—I've been culpably careless with a spirit lamp and am obliged to wear a mask for some time."

As he approached her bedside, Mrs. Meade saw that her visitor's face was entirely concealed by a black mask with two small holes for the eyes and a slit for the mouth.

"Now, Mrs. Meade," he said, seating himself in a chair close to the bed, "I have had a long talk with your doctor and we want you to tell me all about this mysterious trouble that is thought to be affecting your physical health. Please be perfectly frank with me. When did this—shall I say obsession?—begin, and what precisely is it?"

"All right," Mrs. Meade started off speaking in a quick even voice, "I will try to tell you the whole story. It began years ago—when first I went to live in Regent's Park. One afternoon I was most disagreeably struck by the appearance of a man who was loafing about just outside the Baker Street Tube Station. I can't tell you how strong, how horrible an impression he made on me."

"Take your time, Mrs. Meade. Take your time," put in the intent listener. "Can you explain why that first impression was so strong?"

Was his voice sympathetic? She wished she could see his face. Constraining herself to speak more slowly, she went on. "I can only say that there was something utterly hateful about his face, with its bold, malignant eyes—lashless eyes that searched me like sharp unshaded lights. He seemed to leer at me with a 'So there you are!' sort of look, and the queer thing was that, though I had never to my knowledge seen him before and—as I say—his appearance came to me as a shock, yet it was not a shock of complete surprise."

"How do you mean, Mrs. Meade?"

"Well, I don't know how to put it, but in the violent distaste I felt for him there was a faint element of—shall I say sub-sub-conscious recognition?—as though he reminded me of something I had once either dreamt or imagined. I don't know! I

remember vaguely noticing that he wore a black slouch hat and had no tie on but a sort of greenish muffler round his neck. Otherwise his clothes were ordinary. Though without any nameable malformation, somehow he gave an impression of deformity. His face was horrible—moistly pale like,—like a toadstool! It's no good! I can't describe him. I can only repeat that the aversion he inspired in me was extraordinarily violent. As I hurried past him and went down the steps, I was conscious of his stare, and it was a great relief to disappear into the lift and be whirled away in the Tube. Though I had plenty to do that day, I could never quite dismiss him from my mind, and when I returned by Tube late in the evening it was a horrid shock to find him lurking at the top of the steps just as though he were waiting for me. This time there was no doubt that he definitely leered at me, and I thought he faintly shook his head. It was almost as though he wanted to recall some forgotten understanding or complicity between the two of us. I hurried past him. Soon I had that horrid sense of being followed and glanced over my shoulder. Sure enough, there he was—just a few paces behind! And, as I turned, he slightly raised his hat. I almost ran home, and I cannot say what a relief it was to hear my front door slam behind me. Well, I saw him the next day and the next, and practically every day. The distaste with which I recognized him became an absolute shudder, and each time his cynical glance seemed to grow bolder. Several times he followed me towards my house, but never right up to the door. I made tentative inquiries at the little shops round the Tube station, but no one seemed to have noticed him. The dread of meeting him became an absolute obsession. Soon I gave up going in the

Tube and would make long detours in order to avoid that part of Baker Street."

"You minded him as much as all that, did you?"

"Yes."

"Go on; don't let me interrupt you."

"For some time," continued Mrs. Meade, "I did not see him and then there was a hideous incident. Returning from a walk in the park one day I found quite a large crowd just outside the gate. A little girl had been run over. An ambulance man was carrying her small lifeless body, and a policeman and some women were attending to the demented mother. Amongst all those shocked and pitying faces, suddenly I saw one vile, mocking face, its familiar features horribly twisted in a gloating grin. With positive glee, he pointed at the dead child and then turned right round and leered at me.

"After this horrible encounter you may be sure I shunned Upper Baker Street, but one day, just as I started to walk through the park, the heaviest rain I have ever seen came on, so I rushed to the taxis at the top of the street and jumped into the first one on the rank. In hope of a penny, a small boy opened the door for me, and, to avoid getting my hat wet, I told him the address to give to the driver. To my surprise we started off at a terrific pace. I looked up and saw a short, rather crouched back and a greenish muffler. The speed at which we were going was insane, and I banged on the window. The driver turned. Imagine my nightmare horror when I saw it was that awful man. Yes, the dreaded face was leering at me through the glass! Heaven knows why we did not crash at once. Instead of keeping his eye on the road, the creature on the box kept turning

round to grin and gloat at me. Faster and faster we whirled through the traffic. I was so sick with horror that, in spite of the appalling speed, I would at all costs have jumped out, but—struggle as I might—I could not turn the handle. I think I screamed and screamed and screamed. I was simply flung about in the taxi. At last there was an appalling shock.

"I can just remember the tinkle of breaking glass and the awful pain in my head—and then blackness welling up.

"When I came to, I was in a hospital where for hours I had been unconscious from concussion. I began to ask questions, but could learn only that I had been picked up from the debris of a taxi which had crashed into some railings, and that it was a miracle that I had not been killed. As for the driver, he had unaccountably disappeared before the police arrived and no one claimed to have seen him. The taxi bore no number and could not be identified. The police were completely baffled.

"After this I insisted on leaving the neighbourhood, and made my husband take a house in Chelsea.

"Nearly a year passed. I began to hope that I should never see him again; but I became ill, and after endless consultations a very serious operation was decided on. Everything was arranged and the evening before the date fixed I drove to the nursing home with the sinking sensation natural to the occasion. I rang the bell and the door was promptly opened by a short man. I almost screamed. In spite of the incongruous livery, it was *him*! There he stood—sickly pale as ever, and with that awful, evil, intimate smile!

"In a wild panic I sprang back from the door and back into the taxi which was waiting with my luggage. Directly I got

home I cancelled the operation. In spite of all the Harley Street opinions, I recovered. The operation was proved unnecessary."

Mrs. Meade paused in her narrative. The listener spoke.

"Then this being—whatever he is—on this occasion may be said to have done you a good turn?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Meade, "perhaps, but it didn't make me dread him any the less. Oh, the ghastly dreams I had!—that I had been given the anaesthetic and was thought unconscious, but I wasn't; I couldn't move though and I saw the surgeon approach and, as he bent over me, his face was *the face!*" With a sigh of exhaustion, she leant back on her pillows.

"Did you ever see him again, Mrs. Meade?"

"I'm sorry," answered the patient hastily, "I can't tell you about the next meeting. It is still too unbearable. There are things one can't speak about. It was then, oh, God! that I understood why he had pointed at the dead child and leered at me out of his vile little eyes. That was a long time ago, but the dread is always with me. You see, I still have one child left—I am always looking out for what I so fear. I can never leave my house without expecting to see him. What if one day I should meet him inside my house?"

"I do not think you will ever do that, Mrs. Meade."

"I suppose you think the whole thing is an illusion, Doctor Stone? And in any case I don't suppose I have been able to give any impression of what—it—he—the creature is like," sighed Mrs. Meade.

The listener rose from his chair and leant over the invalid.

"Is—his—face—like this?" he asked, and, as he spoke, he whipped off his mask.

No one who heard it will ever forget Mrs. Meade's scream.

Two nurses rushed into her room, followed by Doctor Stone, who, punctual to his appointment, had that very moment arrived.

The dead woman lay on the bed.

There was no one else in the room.

Twenty-five hundred copies of this book have been printed from Intertype Garamond by The Collegiate Press, George Banta Publishing Company, Menasha, Wisconsin. The paper is Winnebago Eggshell. The binding cloth is Holliston Black Novelex.



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Asquith, Cynthia
This Mortal Coil

CYNTHIA ASQUITH

Lady Cynthia Asquith is widely-known for her work as an anthologist in the genre of the macabre, and almost as well-known for one excellent collection of crime stories she edited almost two decades ago. Every connoisseur of the supernatural has either long owned or long sought three notable anthologies in the field—*The Ghost Book* (1927), *Shudders* (1929), and *When Churchyards Yawn* (1931); just as every whodunit fan knows her ably-edited collection, *The Back Cap* (1928).

Cynthia Asquith writes sparingly, as is indicated by *This Mortal Coil*, her initial collection of her own stories. She lives in the Somerset country of England a large part of the year, but spends some part of every year in London. Her first play was recently produced in England.



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